

BUNNIES

and other awful things



Fantasy Tales

by

Seth Kallen Deitch

Xenolite Press

Bunnies

And Other Awful Things

By
Seth Kallen Deitch

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FIRST EDITION

Preface

Many who read my work insist that it falls easily into the science fiction genre, but I beg to differ. The science in these tales is either made up, bad or just plain non-existent. I have no problem with playing fast and loose with facts no matter that they are about science, history or any other branch of human learning. I will gladly tell my readers that two plus two equals five if it helps me spin a good yarn. In spite of the lack of elves and fairy folk, my work is clearly fantasy.

I have been writing since the early '90's having spent much of my previous life with other things like painting, collage, publishing, making music and flying model rockets to name only a few. I don't feel that story telling is something that I have a particular talent for. My work is driven only by the need to do it and any small facility that I have for it has been gained at the cost of hard work, rejection and humiliation, but really more humiliation and rejection than hard work.

Save for the very first, all of the stories in this book have been written since the turn of the century and mostly reflect my "mature" style as opposed to my "Immature" style of slavishly borrowing from the manner and themes of dime novel and pulp writers who no one under the age of sixty knows or cares about. There is no question that I am stuck in the past. I only rarely read books or listen to music that is less than a half century old. Put a few drinks in me and the lion's share of the twentieth century will vanish from my consciousness altogether and you will find me animatedly lecturing on the subject of zeppelins or the profound benefits of monkey glands. I am one of those thankfully rare folk who can forget that television exists while sitting in front of a computer. There is no rhyme or reason to this, it is of no benefit to my survival and has a distinctly negative effect on my relations with the fair sex.

In any case, I hope that you will find these tales to be diverting or at least amusing, but don't come here for enlightenment. Represent anything you read here as fact at your peril. You will receive no education here, not one morsel that will add to your knowledge of the world. You have been warned.

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What follows is one of my earliest stories written around 1992 or so. The illustrations were drawn in 2008 by my brother Simon and add immensely to the story's impact.

Rabbit's Foot

With illustrations by
Simon Deitch

Merrily he hops through the countryside with his basket of brightly colored eggs leaving them to delight children everywhere. He is, of course, the Easter Bunny, one of the more peculiar legends of our civilization.

How on earth did it get started? From earliest times we hear of this mysterious creature. The stories were obviously pre-Christian and told of a rabbit or hare that would come in the spring and lay colored eggs amongst the greenery. The hare was purported to be the companion of the Saxon goddess Eostra, but similar tales originate all over Europe and the Middle East. These eggs were thought to be signs of auspicious tidings from the gods and were highly prized when found.

An egg laying rabbit? In spite of the obvious fertility symbolism it hardly seems the likely stuff of myth. While it is true that many a mythical beast combines attributes from a number of animals, they are almost always limited to the physical characteristics rather than behaviors. A horse with the wings of an eagle rather than a chicken that marks fence posts like a dog. This oviparous lagomorph seems to be an uncommon exception to the rule.

It was not until 1926, when a unique fossil was found in a Spanish gravel pit that anything like an answer to this question emerged. Orlando Rojas, an

itinerant bricklayer, found a peculiar stone while stealing a few pounds of gravel to border his garden from a quarry outside Toledo.

A friend who could read told him that the stone might be able to be sold to someone at the University. It was, to a German paleontologist named Helmut Steinhass who, by luck, had been working in Spain that year.

When the discovery was made initially, no one in the paleontological community thought much of it. It appeared to be the hind leg bones from a small leaping mammal. The fossil was embedded in mudstone from the Miocene epoch. (fig.1)Steinhass named it *lagotherium steinhassi* (Steinhass's rabbit beast) because he believed that it led a lifestyle similar to that of a rabbit.

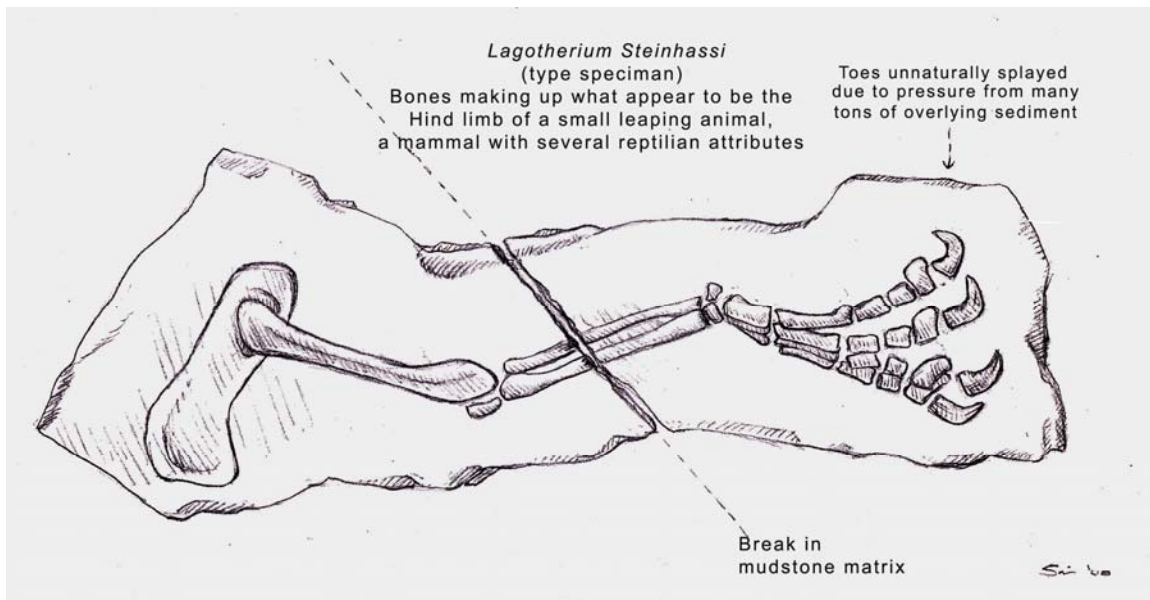


Fig.1. Steinhass' original fossil of *lagotherium*

The bones themselves clearly revealed that the animal was neither an actual rabbit nor anything closely related to a rabbit. Fossils unearthed by Steinhass himself the following season revealed even more striking differences when he found first teeth and then an almost complete skeleton

including jawbones designed to support a peculiar horny beak that served the same purpose as a rabbit's cutting incisors. (fig.2) The animal had molars that seemed to indicate a diet of roots and grasses. He thought at first that he had some sort of unusual European possum but careful examination and consultation with his colleagues led him inevitably to the correct conclusion. The creature was a monotreme, in the same subclass as the strange duckbilled platypus and its relative, the spiny anteater of Australia. This group of animals exists in a biological never-never land between mammals and reptiles. While they have warm blood, nurse their young and grow a rich hairy coat, they lack nipples, oozing milk from directly on their bellies for their young to lick up, have a conjoined genital, urinary and anal tract and rather than bear their young alive, they lay eggs. They are, unfortunately, poorly represented in the fossil record. It is believed by some scientists that the monotremes descended independently from the therapsids, a group of advanced reptiles that gave rise to the mammals, but this has yet to be proven.

While the modern placental mammals and their marsupial cousins are all related by evolutionary paths, which have been well understood, the descent of the monotremes is more obscure. *Lagothorium* was the first such animal discovered to have lived in Europe in anything approaching recent times.

In 1926, Steinhass was already sixty-two years old and suffered from infirmities, which kept him from work in the blazing sun day after day. He was unable to follow up on the strong start he had made with *lagothorium* save for a short paper on the subject that included sketches of the existing fossils. He died in 1931 and the paper was tucked away in a university library at Heidelberg where it would sit unread for over forty years.

Peter Reston, an American graduate student working in Heidelberg in the spring of 1974, had taken an interest in the life

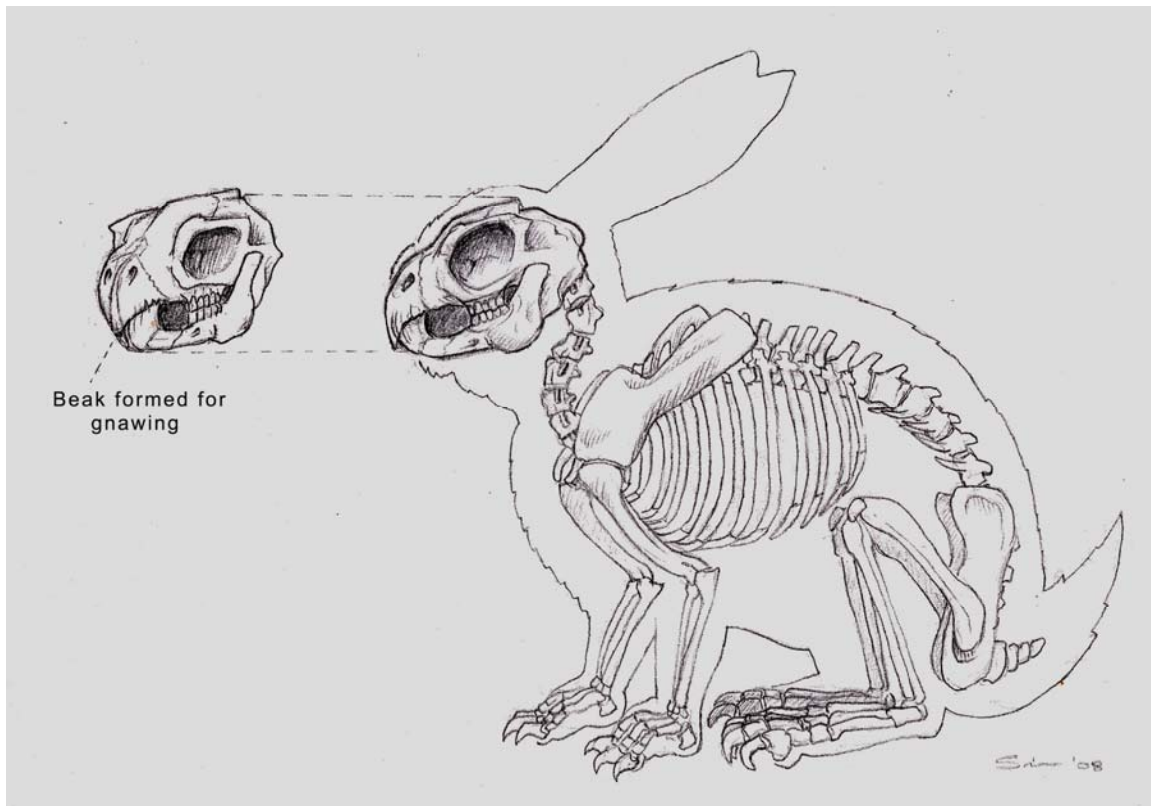


Fig.2. Reconstruction of *lagotherium* skeleton.

of Steinhass as part of his work on the history of German natural philosophy. In the course of his studies he read every paper Steinhass had ever written including the one about the fossil known as *lagotherium*. Although the paper didn't figure prominently in his thesis, he remembered it as a fascinating curiosity.

By 1982, Reston had become a lecturer in the history of science at Harvard. In his spare time he had been compiling a book for the lay readership on the collections, or "cabinets" as they were known, kept by scientists before the nineteenth century. These collections are what evolved

into modern natural history museums as their owners died and left them to their respective universities.



Fig.3. a probable reconstruction of *lagotherium*.

To the dismay of scholars, many of these cabinets were broken up and, inevitably, some specimens were lost. On the other hand, some institutions were relentlessly conservative and made a point of preserving the old cabinets exactly as they had been put together centuries ago. In researching his book he spent many an hour going over dusty volumes containing etchings, which had been made of some long lost collections.

The illustrations were as often as not made by an artist who had little knowledge of what he was looking at with the result being rather inexact representations of the cabinet's contents.

One March day, something in one of the etchings caught his eye. It was one of several desiccated specimens of God-only-knows-what represented at a rather small size. There was a number next to it, which was repeated amongst the somewhat fancy type below the picture (fig.4) identifying it as *lepus insolitum* (strange rabbit). For Reston, there was something about this “rabbit” that set off an alarm in his brain. It wasn't until the next day while he was taking his morning shower that the name *lagotherium* popped into his mind. That afternoon he was back at his desk looking for the exact illustration that he had seen before. Anton VanDenPael, a noted physician of

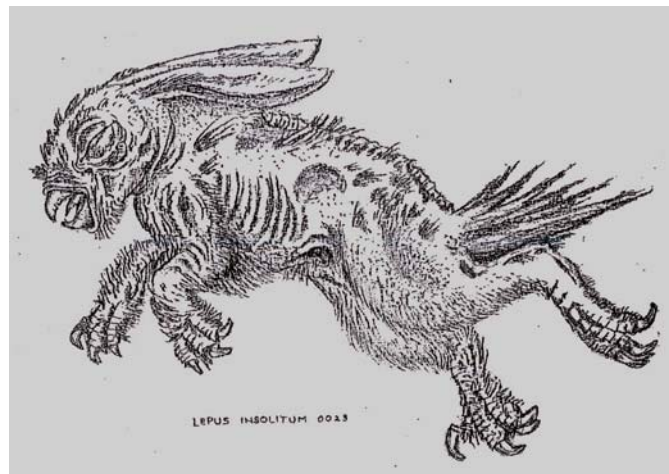


Fig.4. *Lepus insolitum* as it appeared in the catalog of Anton VanDenPael's cabinet.

The Hague, had assembled the particular cabinet he sought in the 1770's.

The collection, Reston discovered after much research, had been broken up in the late nineteenth century when a descendant had fallen upon hard times and sold it off piecemeal. The tiny mummy might have never again surfaced

had it not been spotted on television by a friend of Reston's son. The specimen in question was now part of the collection of Edmund Swift an eccentric English popular science writer who also had a television show for children. His show, titled "Small Wonder" ran on a number of PBS stations in the USA and was popular with pre-adolescents. He was frankly surprised to see the specimen used in this way, for its appearance was, to say the least, unsettling, probably more so to children.

Swift, it seems, had no idea what he had. He had been using it to demonstrate how mummification can take place in nature and was under the impression that the creature was a perfectly ordinary rabbit whose features had been distorted by desiccation.

Reston telephoned Swift and arranged to meet with him in London where he might have it x-rayed and make detailed measurements of the shriveled remains.

The specimen was in worse condition than in 1778. (fig.5) The small, desiccated animal was incomplete, lacking a foreleg and one of the longish ears; further, most of the reddish fur was long gone. In spite of the things lacking, it corresponded bone for bone with the known fossils of *lagotherium*. The creature was interesting both for how rabbit-like and un-rabbit-like it was. It had the hind legs of a cottontail replicated in a virtually perfect example of parallel evolution and the remaining ear was almost the same shape as that of a European hare. The face was quite different from just about anything he had seen before. Although the flesh was dry and shriveled, the features could be discerned quite reliably. The jaw structure

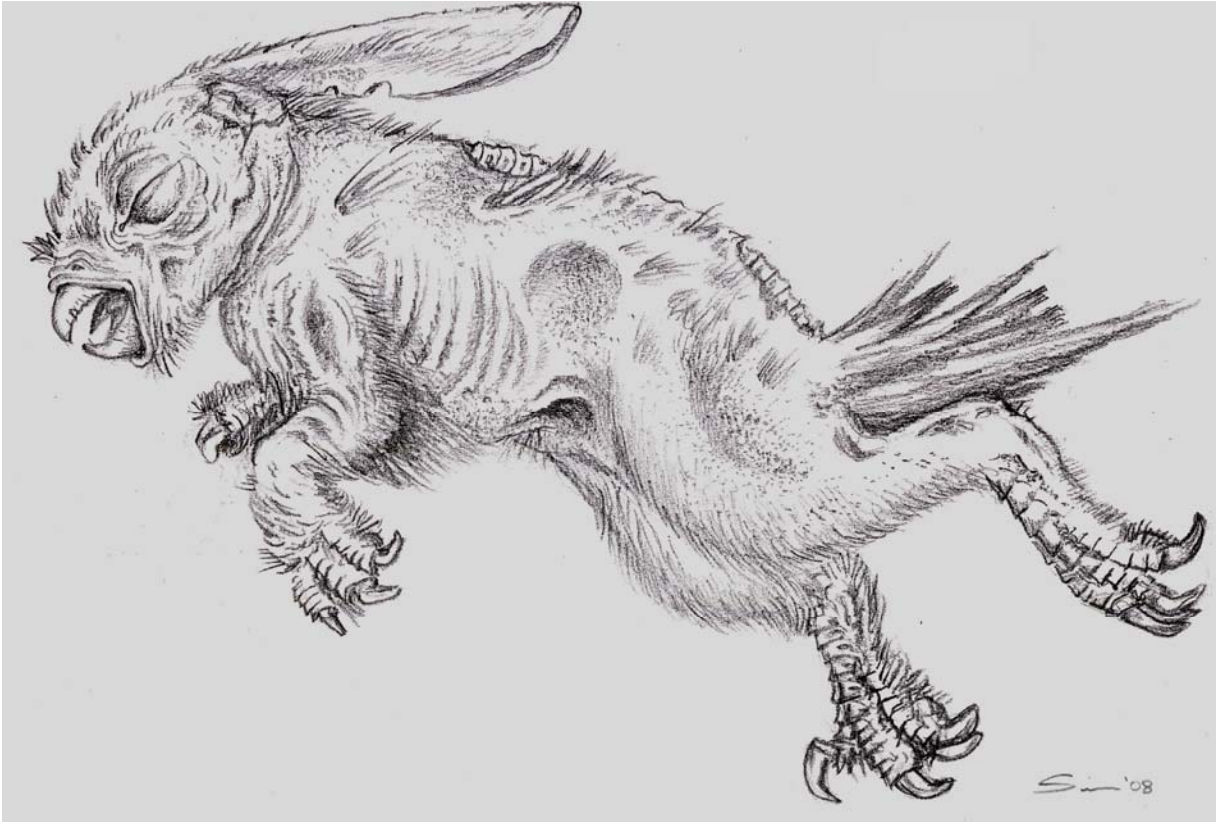


Fig.5. VanDenPael's specimen as it appears today.

was quite similar in shape to that of a lagomorph, but all of the components seemed to have been derived from completely different structures most notably, where the front incisors would have been was a beak that had been grown to a shape designed to serve a similar purpose. There were lips around the beak, but they probably could not have been closed all the way in the living creature. The nostrils opened on the outer edge of the upper beak and were not all that easy to notice giving the animal an appearance of being noseless. The eyes were placed rather far forward and somewhat closer together than those of a rabbit probably giving the creature reasonably good binocular vision. The result was not a cute bunny face, (fig.6) particularly in the case of a dried mummy, but even in life, *lagotherium* would have looked quite strange to an observer used to the body plan of placental mammals.



Fig. 6. Reconstruction of *lagotherium* head.

Neither Swift nor Reston were able to discern reliably where or when the animal was found. Reston knew from the etching that it had been collected at least two-hundred years before. A large percentage of the flesh had become *adipocere*, a natural soapy substance that animal fat can convert to under certain conditions, one of which is being frozen for some time following death. The important result of this was that the original shape of the animal was better preserved than it

might have been. Carbon dating showed the creature to be approximately nine thousand years dead, which almost placed it within the realm of human history. MRI scans showed the internal structure well enough to clearly indicate that it was indeed a monotreme, a female carrying an egg. Careful dissection revealed the egg to be mottled in shades of green, blue and brown, ideal camouflage amongst foliage.

Reston was now certain he had found the creature that was responsible for tales of the hare who comes in the spring to lay colored eggs in the grass. Swift sold the specimen to Reston for two thousand dollars who took it to The Hague in hopes of turning up information on VanDenPael and possibly the origin of the creature. There he was able to find copies of VanDenPael's

notebooks in a college library. The good doctor had bought the carcass from a merchant who had obtained it near the banks of the Tigris River. Armed with this information, Reston named his specimen *lagotherium steinhassi Mesopotamia* (Steinhass's rabbit beast from the land between the rivers).

Returning to the U.S., Reston gave a series of lectures at Harvard with the purpose in mind of mounting an expedition to Iraq. According to VanDenPael's notes the mummy had been found near the modern town of Zaya to the north of Baghdad. A farmer had turned it up in a field that he had been plowing. Presumably it had washed down the river and deposited in the soil during a spring flood. This is where his search was to begin. Money for the expedition was finally obtained through the university and various alumni and a starting date was set for January 1991. January 1991 was an unlucky date for it found the United States at war with Iraq which made any kind of expedition there impractical, to say the least. Peter Reston, with great regret, was forced to abandon his quest for the elusive creature.

He returned to his books and his lectures, more or less forgetting about *lagotherium*.

On April 14th, 1995, which was Good Friday, he received a package from the town of Turan in the obscure republic of Tuva in the Russian Federation. The return address was that of a naturalist that he had barely heard of, but who had apparently heard of him and had read his papers, a Doctor Yelena Ya. Turetskeva. It was a wooden crate about four inches on a side and within, cradled in a nest of excelsior was an egg (fig.7) about four centimeters around, only slightly ovoid, mottled blue, green and brown. It stirred slightly. Something tiny and alive dwelt within.

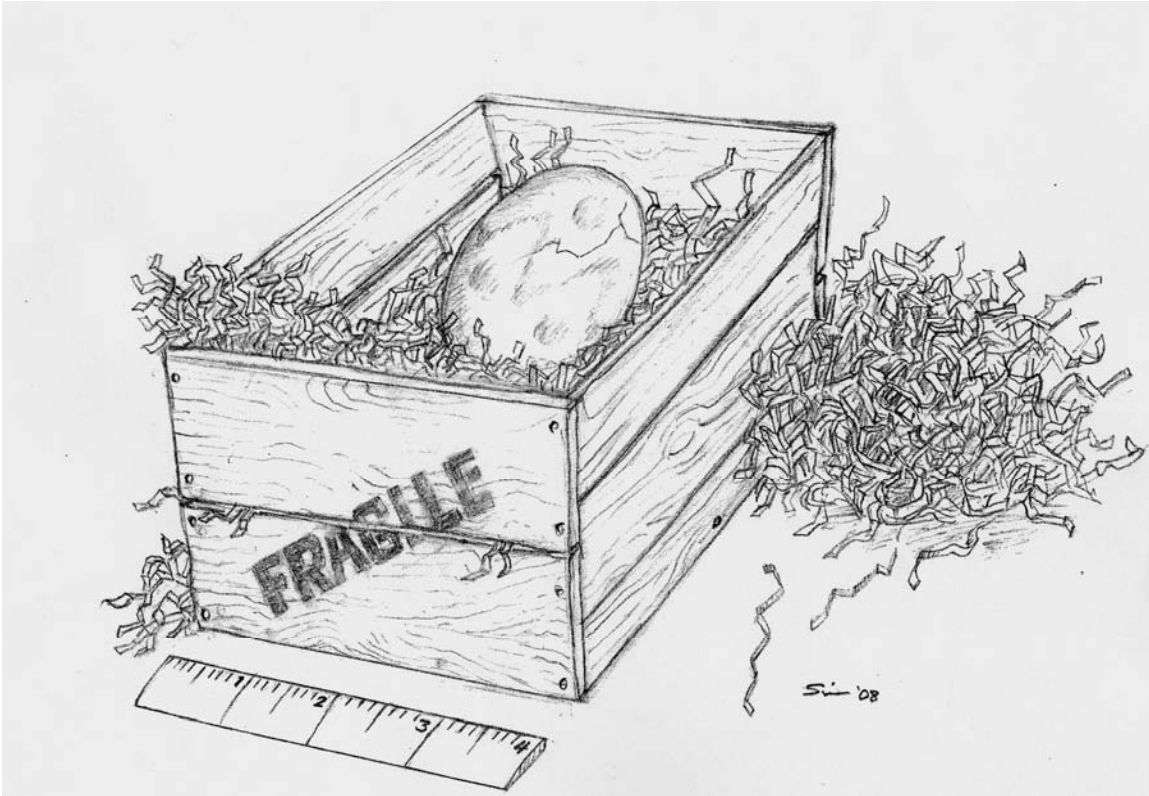


Fig.7. An egg.

The letter that came with it was written in Russian and he would have to get it translated, but within the Cyrillic text were two English words. They read “Happy Easter”.

Edison really did once tell a reporter that he was working on a method for speaking to the souls of the dead. Also, the quote from Modern Mechanics is 100% real.

In my youth I spent a great deal of time hitch hiking throughout the country and a good deal of that took place in the great state of New Jersey. It amazes me to this day the wonders that that small state contains.

Thomas Edison and the Souls of the Dead

One black howling wintry night in 1920-just such a night when superstitious people would bar their doors and windows against marauding ghosts- Thomas Edison, the famous inventive wizard, gathered a small group of scientists in his laboratory to witness his secret attempts to lure spirits from beyond the grave and trap them with instruments of incredible sensitivity.

Until recently only a few favored spectators ever knew the outcome of this sensational experiment. Only the few Edison intimates, assembled like members of a mystic clan, ever knew what unearthly forms materialized in the scientist's laboratory that night to give proof or disproof of existence beyond the grave.

For thirteen years results of Edison's astounding attempt to penetrate that wall that lies beyond mortality have been withheld from the world, but now the amazing story can be told.

-Modern Mechanics and Invention, October, 1933

I Nixon's Last Day

It's pretty easy for me to remember the exact date even after all these years. It was Saturday August tenth, nineteen seventy-four.

It was still early morning when I was dropped off at the exit to the Tappan Zee Bridge. I was lucky to have picked up a ride all the way from Hartford. I didn't have to stand too long at Tarrytown before I got a ride from a salesman who was heading down the Garden state. He was a nice guy. Anyone who picks up a hitch-hiking long-haired hippy kid he doesn't know from Adam is a nice guy in my book.

He nodded in my direction. "You heard about the president, right?" Part of the deal with hitch-hiking is that you are sort of obligated to listen to whatever the driver has to say to you. This guy, like everyone else that morning, wanted to talk about Nixon. I understood why, but the last thing I wanted to talk about was that asshole. It's the price of transport. "I can't believe he just quit!" he said, "I didn't even know a president could *do* that."

“He was the first to ever do it.” I was trying to keep my responses neutral. I guess my long hair and general vagabond look pretty much said where I stood on the matter, but there was no need to make a big issue out of it. In those days looking like I did usually really was an indicator of opinion. I didn’t need to underline it by actually saying something, particularly to a guy who looked pretty conservative and was doing me a favor.

“Oh yeah,” he continued, “I know it must seem just fine to *you*, but how can this be good for the country in the long run?”

I was seventeen and too young to really understand. This guy was at least two decades older than me. He had seen everything be one way and then see it all start to turn upside down. America probably hadn’t had such social upheaval since the Civil War, but I had grown up through all of it. Kennedy had been elected and assassinated in my earliest years of school. The Civil Rights movement and Vietnam and all those other movements had dominated the news as I had gone through the elementary grades and come to a head when I was in junior high. And Nixon had come along. I didn’t remember him from the McCarthy era or as Vice President, but my parents had impressed on me who and what he was and I had seen him in action, a slippery eel, smart and conniving. And Watergate had happened confirming everything I thought I knew about him, that he was a paranoid and a crook. What did *I* know about normality? I risked a controversial comment. “Better than the alternative.” I said.

He surprised me. “You know, you might be right! Everyone is starting to see the whole government as hopelessly corrupt. I can hardly imagine if we had to go through an impeachment. It would just make everything so much worse.”

“I just think he’s a bastard and needed to be taken down a peg.”

“Show a little respect, kid! He’s the *president*.”

“Only until noon.”

The guy took his eyes off of the road to look me in the eye for a few seconds. “Hey, I’m a Liberal, I don’t like him either, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have faith in our institutions. This is a God damned tragedy what happened here, what happened to the presidency, the loss of faith, the loss of the good will of the people. A tragedy.”

It just wasn’t the way I thought back then. It wasn’t that I was shallow, but I sure didn’t see Nixon being out of office as a tragedy. That Friday night my friends and I had celebrated by smoking up our stashes before we had to hit the road. All of us knew better than to hitch-hike with grass, not that some of us, including me, didn’t still do it once in a while, but that night we had something to celebrate. Now it was Saturday morning and I had

already traveled over a hundred miles and was still a little stoned. “I can’t help thinking it serves him right. It serves *us* right for electing him.”

“You’re not even old enough to vote.”

“If people my age had been able to vote, things would have been different.” I really believed that. Amazing.

He dropped me off on the turnpike entrance at Woodbridge. I realized that I was just spitting distance from Tom Edison’s lab. I had been there on a field trip from school about eight years before. Everybody in the class except me had thought it was totally boring. For me it had been like a temple. Something about him...I know he was in most ways just another money-grubbing businessman, but at least he wasn’t some Wall Street hack. He *made* things, things to make the world a better place. I had believed that he *deserved* to get rich unlike most of them. I hadn’t yet learned about a lot of his darker side, how he had taken credit for the research of others. He had pioneered the way modern research labs worked in terms of publicity. All of his salaried employees had done much of the work, but it was the Edison name that was the marketable commodity.

Jan was waiting for me in Cherry Hill. She had promised me good food and good loving and I wanted both pretty bad, but I was taken by sudden nostalgia. I wanted to see the Edison Museum. I started to walk off of the highway entrance toward town. I planned to call Jan as soon as I saw a phone booth.

I called her and at the last second decided to lie. I just said that no one was stopping for me. It might have been true. It was just easier than telling her I had a sudden urge to check out inventions. I didn’t even feel guilty when she called me “poor thing.”

I realized that I had no idea how to find the place. The city was called Edison and either Woodbridge was part of it or it was part of Woodbridge and where in the hell Menlo Park was, was anybody’s guess. I asked a guy at a gas station when I went to see if they had a more local map. Turns out that Menlo Park wasn’t a town at all and the place I wanted wasn’t in Menlo Park anyway but in West Orange so my confusion was moot. I had to either stick my thumb out again or hop on a bus. The bus only cost thirty-five cents and it came every half hour. I got on it.

I thought that I would remember the place, but I obviously didn’t. It was just a couple of industrial looking brick buildings with a few sheds here and there. One of the sheds stood on a circular platform. This was the famous “Black Maria” studio. Not the original, but a reproduction made to promote the Spencer Tracy biopic in 1941. The place was closed. Stupid. It was a Saturday.

I went up to the door to see what the hours were so I could plan to stop by on the way back. There was a metal rack by the door that contained brochures about the place. I started to read. After about five minutes, I became aware that there was a guy standing behind me. I turned. “Just checking the hours.” I said.

He was sort of greasy looking, about twenty years old, I guessed. I was thinking probably Italian. He was holding a rake. “S’o.k. pally. I mostly see school kids dragged here by their teachers lookin’ bored to death. Don’t usually see a guy like you unless he was just looking for a doorway to light up a joint. I was thinkin’ maybe you could turn me on.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, man. I’m thumbing my way down the pike. I can’t afford to be holding.”

“Yeah, s’alright. Just thought it was worth askin’. I actually have some down at the shed, but it’s shit weed that I grow myself behind the lab. Haven’t tasted any Columbo in a dog’s age. Y’wanna tokе?”

Well, it would make getting off of the highway at least slightly worth it after the disappointment of finding the place closed. “Columbo! You’ve mistaken me for someone who has a job! Whathehell, I wouldn’t mind a hit or two.”

I found out that his name was Joey and he was the assistant groundskeeper. He was working for a few hours on Saturday for overtime. The “shed” turned out to be the rebuilt movie studio. Inside it had rakes, push lawnmowers, bags of fertilizer and grass seed. There was a card table and a couple of chairs old enough that they might have been from Edison’s original lab. The place didn’t have any windows; just a big skylight in the ceiling that looked like it was from a greenhouse. Joey stuck his arm between two big bags of fertilizer and pulled out a cigar box. Inside was about a half ounce of leafy green pot and a beat up old kazoo that had only traces of the original red and blue paint with a faucet screen stuck up where the tissue paper would normally have gone. A simple but effective carburetor. He loaded up the bowl and lit it with a Zippo with the little end in his mouth and his finger blocking the fat end then uncovering it halfway through the pull. He held his breath for three seconds before he coughed out a massive cloud of cannabis smoke while passing the pipe and lighter my way.

He had understated by calling it ‘shit weed’. It wasn’t bad at all. The stuff I had left behind was way shittier than this. After a few back and fourths, I was in a mellow place and saw performing bears on the inside of my eyelids when I closed them. There was an old Burl Ives record playing in my head...

*When the circus comes to town,
I love to see the clowns,
But the bear on the ball with the parasol,
I love him most of all...*

“Hey pally!” Joey jolted me from my reverie.
I grinned broadly. “This dope isn’t bad!”
“It’s just homegrown, but I give it lots of love. I talk to the plants.”
Perhaps it was an uncharitable thought, but I wondered how this guy’s grating Jersey accent didn’t kill them. “Whatever you’re doing, it seems to get the job done!”
“S’o.k., I guess. So, you’re really into the ‘Wizard of Menlo Park’?”
“He was my biggest hero when I was a little kid. The first time I was here it was like a trip to my own personal heaven. It made a big impression on me.”
“You must have been pretty easy to impress as a little kid, because this ain’t much of a museum!”
“What? Doesn’t it still have all of the original equipment? The telegraphs? The stock tickers? The phonograph?”
“Oh, yeah. All that old crap is still there.”
Old crap! Blasphemy! “It’s not even so much the machines themselves, it’s being in the place where the world was changed forever.”
“Man! You are baked!” Some people just don’t feel the romance of technology the way I did. Most, really.
“No, I just really dig him. It’s a bummer that the place is closed!”
“I got a key.”
“What?”
“I got a key to the place. Ya wanna go in and look around.”
I swallowed some smoke and then belched a tiny cloud. “You can get in?”
“Sure! I work here. Let’s go in the back way.”
The back door was an old loading dock.
“I don’t know too much about all of this stuff.” He said as he unlocked the door. “I know he came up with light bulbs, record players and movies and I have seen some of the other stuff. I guess that you might know more being really into that stuff.”
“What other stuff?”
He ushered me into the doorway. Inside it was just a dimly lit ordinary loading dock with pallets loaded with various things like garden supplies,

boxes of pamphlets and junk to sell in the gift shop. “Stuff like generators, telegraph stuff. Dull shit. Of course there is some weird stuff that they don’t show the public.”

“Like what?”

“He tried all kinds of things. Some of them were kind of loopy. The people who run the museum and the Edison family don’t want him to have that kind of image so they just don’t show that stuff to people.”

“What could give Tom Edison a bad image?”

“He was messing with anti-gravity, electricity sent through the air and talking to ghosts.” He brought me through the dock and past a couple of offices and finally into what was obviously a public gallery with displays and dioramas of things like the moment he first got the electric lamp to work.

I said “There was a guy who once worked for him; he was from somewhere in Russia or Yugoslavia. Tesla. He was working on anti-gravity and broadcast power, but Edison didn’t want to spend time on that stuff or pay Tesla what he wanted so he left the company. I heard something about an experiment for talking to the souls of the departed, but I thought nothing came of it. It was a pretty simple device if I recall.”

“This thing isn’t simple.”

“It exists?”

“Yeah, it exists. I don’t suppose you’d wanna see it?”

Holy shit! I took a deep breath and calmed down. It was probably nothing. “If it’s no trouble.”

“Then leave us check it out, buddy.” Joey seemed to be having a pretty good time playing tour guide.

He led me back the way we came and took a left turn after the first office. We were in a part of the building that had a couple of stories with the floors made of rubberized steel grating. It looked old, but sturdy enough. We were on the second level. He pointed to a metal spiral staircase and said, “Go down.”

There was an amazing amount of stuff down there. It was like a whole factory floor with devices large and small everywhere. Some of them were on work tables, some of them just sat on the floor. There were fat cables running every which-way. In one section at a far end, the steel grating had been cut away in a square area about fifteen feet on a side. Resting on the concrete floor about four feet below was a large machine that rose through the gap clearing it by about six feet. There were three big transformers on one side of it attached to an electric motor. I could understand the motor’s size because it ran a chain drive that looked like it was intended to spin

several huge black disks. When I say huge, I mean that they were about twelve feet in diameter and about two inches thick. Even if they had been made of balsa wood, they would have weighed about a ton each, but they looked like they were solid steel with a thick coating of shellac. The disks were engraved with complex looking grooves like those of a record only more intricate looking and the styli that sat in them seemed to have complicated heads. There was a massive block of hardware that looked like the works of fifty cash registers, all gears and levers arranged in a baffling mechanical mire. There was a metal box bristling with levers, switches and gauges and next to it was something odd. It seemed to be a frame that enclosed an expanse of shining silver. Along one side was a row of electric lamps. "This is it?" I asked.

"That's it." said Joey. "In all its glory."

I walked over to the framed silver thing. I stuck my head around the back of it and saw a couple zillion little levers in a rack behind it. They all had connections that led to the cash register guts. I looked around the front and realized that what I had though was a uniform metallic surface was made of many thousands of pinheads, each one going through its own hole in a thin metal panel and attached to one of the tiny levers on the other side. Above it was a large brass cone that looked like the horn of a tuba. "Do you have any idea how this thing works? *Does* it work?"

"A couple of the old timers around here tell me that one of the caretakers got it running about twenty years ago or so. They say he quit without notice after he did. I think he was just fired because he got caught messing with shit."

Over past the machine was a work table with a few random parts scattered on it and another device that stood on a carriage that was a peculiar assembly of disks with curved slots and lenses with a bank of large electric lamps above it. There was also a device about the dimensions of a coffin that had all sorts of arcane looking probes protruding into it. It obviously was intended for a person to stand in it, but it would take a lot of persuading to get me into that thing. Lord only knows what it was intended to do, but it made me think of an iron maiden.

"So turning it on is out of the question?" I assumed that of course it would be.

"Why not? Nobody's here, I just don't know how much noise it makes."

"Wait a second; you don't even know how it works."

Joey picked up a dusty notebook that had a hole drilled through the upper left corner and was hung by a string from the control panel. "This prolly has what we need to know!"

I looked it over. It wasn't a real user's manual, just notes full of terms that I didn't really understand like 'multi-axial engraving' and 'vibrational transcoding'. There was a diagram of the pin-studded board labeled "dimensional repeater." We finally decided that the large double knife switch with the word 'power' scrawled above it in pencil was probably the one we wanted.

Joey pulled it closed and I expected to see either nothing happen or a shower of sparks and *then* nothing happen. Instead, the giant black disks slowly started rotating each in the opposite direction of the one next to it. They were almost silent and there was surprisingly little vibration. Apparently everything had been constructed to close tolerances. The disks started to gain speed and the mechanical assembly started to move quite actively. There was some creaking and clattering, but not anywhere near as much as I would have expected, like the sound of several muffled adding machines. The device, as huge and complicated as it was, had been assembled by the best engineers available at the time because Edison only employed the very best. The silvery surface in the frame seemed to ripple but I couldn't tell what it was supposed to be doing. I saw a small knife switch above the bank of lights on the side and closed it. All of the lamps except for one came on and evenly lit the frame from one side. I caught my breath. The million pins were moving in and out of the surface creating a moving image from the shadows they cast. The image was of the work table on the other side. "Holy shit!" I said. "It's making a picture of the other side of the room!"

"No it ain't" said Joey. "Look, there isn't the same stuff on the table. It's a movie." A man walked into the image. It was Thomas Alva Edison. He was in late middle age as he had looked in the teens. The image was weird; it resembled neither movies nor television. It was more like a moving Daguerreotype. The images were sharper in the static parts than the moving parts where there was a sort of cloudy blur. I could only really see Edison's features clearly when he was still.

"Hello!" He said. The sound came from the brass horn.

"Wow!" I said, "Talking pictures! I knew he had experimented with synch sound in movies, but nothing this elaborate."

"I'm no motion picture." Said the image of Edison.

"Yeah", I said to Joey, "It's more like a television image. His own version of video tape."

"I can not see you, I can only hear. I can figure out what the word 'television' means, but what is 'video tape'?"

Both Joey and I gaped at the image silently. "Holy shit!" I breathed.

“What was that?” Said the image of Edison. “I couldn’t make that out!”

I tried to get a hold of myself. I half wondered if this was some stoned fantasy, but the fact was I wasn’t all that high. “Right.” I said, “Edison was hard of hearing.”

“Edison was, but I’m not!” The image snapped back. “You’re just mumbling!”

“What the fuck?” Said Joey.

“Hello there you! I don’t allow my employees to use that kind of language! One more time and I’ll dock you a day’s pay!” The image looked momentarily confused. “Pardon me. Sometimes I think I’m really Edison.”

“Is this some sort of time machine?” I asked no one in particular.

Joey said, “How would I know?”

Edison’s image said, “No. The machine contains the personality of Edison, or rather a multi-axial engraving of the personality of Edison. Edison first recorded the voice and then the motion picture and then finally the essence.”

“Holy sh....” I stopped myself, making note of Edison’s dislike of strong language. “I mean, Golly! What’s a multi-axial engraving of a personality?”

The image wavered and I heard a small clatter as several of the styli skated across the great discs to find new channels. “It is called a ‘pneumagram’, a recording of his essence.”

“Essence. You’re his soul?!?”

“No. I’m similar to a picture of his persona. Some might call it a soul, but Edison never would have. I’m not alive. Edison had been hoping that he might provide a way for people to live on after death so their wisdom could survive and be of use to later generations. Edison never believed in an immortal soul. He was a staunch materialist, so he sought to create one.”

“And you have been here all these years in that machine?”

“Not really. I’m a recording. I only exist when the machine is active.” The image paused and I heard the styli shift again. “How may years? My last awareness it was nineteen forty-four. We were still at war with Germany.”

“Not still. Again. Wait a second. Edison died in nineteen thirty-one. The first world war was long over by then!”

Joey smirked at me. “You act like you really believe this!”

“So what’s *your* explanation?” Joey had nothing to say to that.

The image spoke. “This recording was made in nineteen seventeen. Edison abandoned this project and moved on, but I stay the same.”

“Well, it sounds like it has been exactly thirty years since you have been, um, active.”

“Thirty years! What changes there must have been! Can we fly regularly between continents?”

“We have been to the Moon!”

“The Moon! I never thought it would actually happen. What about America? Did we win that last war against Germany? Is there still a president of the United States?”

I pulled my cheap Woolworth’s bought pocket watch out and noted that it was ten after twelve. Now it was me who was smirking. “We won the war against Germany. The president is a guy named Ford.”

“Ford! Is he related to Henry Ford?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think so.”

“What happened to Nixon?” Asked Joey.

I turned and gaped at him. “Don’t you read the papers?”

“No.”

“No TV? No radio?”

“Not lately.”

“Who the devil is Nixon?” asked the image of Edison.

“He used to be the president.” I said to the image. To Joey I said, “He quit yesterday.”

“The president resigned?” Asked Edison’s ghost.

“It’s a long story, Mr. Edison. There was a scandal.”

“I don’t know if I have time for long stories. The machine only runs for a few minutes at a time.”

“Why?”

“Synchronization tends to slip. Errors accumulate. Sympathetic vibrations in the discs. The engineers were still working on those problems when the project was cancelled.” As if to underline his words a low rumble issued from the direction of the huge spinning discs and the image drifted for a moment. “Won’t be long.”

The rumble got louder and Joey and I felt the floor vibrating under our feet. Joey reached over and opened the switch cutting the power. The screen went immediately to a flat expanse of silver and the room was silent. “Why did you do that?” I demanded.

“If this thing gets broken, it’s my ass.” I had nothing to say. He was absolutely right.

“Yeah. I understand. Look, this is the greatest discovery of the century! We have to tell someone!”

“No! You can’t tell nobody! I’m not supposed to let people in here and I’m not supposed to mess with shit. I’ll get canned in a second!”

“Yeah, but Edison is in the machine!”

“Edison ain’t in that machine! It’s just some kind of movie thing!” He shook his head. “I’m sorry, but you better go.”

“What?”

“You gotta go. I shouldn’t’a let you in here in the first place. I guess I was just showing off, but you gotta go now.”

He showed me out, shook my hand and said it had been nice to meet me, but he just didn’t want to talk about the machine at all. There was nothing left for me but to get back on the bus and head for the highway.

II

Telling the Tale

I went for almost a year before I started talking about it. I moved to Massachusetts because a lot of my friends were in college up there and there was work. First I worked on a loading dock and then as a dishwasher in a restaurant that mostly did breakfast trade. In the evenings and on weekends I mostly got stoned or got into odd adventures with my friends. Really, I almost forgot about the Edison thing.

I was doing some bong hits with the Vegetable King. If you don’t mind, I won’t go into why he was called that, but that’s what we called him. He mentioned something about Tricky Dick and we ended up talking about the day he called it quits. “Man, I have one weird-ass story about Nixon’s last day and it doesn’t have a thing to do with Nixon!” I proceeded to tell my story.

Vegetable King wasn’t buying it, but he was entertained by it. He kept asking me for more details and a description of the machine. He was interested in engineering so I told him all I could although I knew that I was getting all kinds of things wrong about it. He ended up telling other people about it and before long I found myself telling the “Edison story” over and over again with more and more embellishments over the next few years until I could barely remember what parts really did happen.

Time did its thing and my life changed. I got more responsible jobs and led a more responsible life. I got married, had a kid, then another, then got unmarried, moved apartments four times, you know, had a life. Before I knew it, I was in my forties and the century was almost over.

I was at that time a budding author. I was really in a place where I should have been at twenty rather than forty-three, the consequence of having

smoked dope on a daily basis until I had been thirty-five. I had only had a couple of stories published at that time. One was in a slick fanzine that had national distribution but only five-hundred copies printed, the other was in a small literary magazine that my work was out of place in, but I knew the editor.

I wrote a short novel about my hitch-hiking adventures that I ended up putting online. I didn't include any of the taller tales including the Edison story because I didn't want to seem like Baron Munchausen. Even so, writing the book brought the story to the front of my mind to be dusted off and examined anew. I was able to sort out the embellishments from what actually happened, but what was left was disturbing enough. But I was pretty sure that it did really happen.

I searched online for 'pneumagram' and only came up with medical procedures. I got nothing meaningful for "vibrational transcoding", "multi-axial engraving" or "dimensional repeater". I realized that I had never learned the name for the machine. I turned up an article from Modern Mechanics and Invention from nineteen thirty-three about Edison's attempt to contact the souls of the dead, but the device described there was nothing like the one the guy called Joey showed me. In fact, I got the impression that the article was a total fiction designed to dispel rumors about what he had really built.

I had never learned Joey's last name and most likely would have forgotten it if I had. I considered calling up the museum but I sensed I would get the run-around after all it was a project that they had chosen not to publicize. I resolved to visit in person that summer. I ended up putting off the trip for another ten years. Finally I had the opportunity in the summer of twenty-aught-eight to go down there because I had business in Manhattan that had been cancelled at the last minute. I had a free day to do what I pleased with.

That day in nineteen seventy-four had been the last time I have visited West Orange, New Jersey. For some reason I believed that it would be easy for me to find the place, but my memory was incomplete and the city had changed over the last quarter century. When I finally got there, the only thing that hadn't changed was the lab itself. Well, one thing had changed; there was the addition of a "Closed for Restorations" sign hung on the fence. Crap.

I tried to phone for information and was told that only the Edison residence was open to the public at the moment. I asked when the lab would re-open and was told that it had been scheduled for this summer but things had fallen behind. "Maybe next spring!" said the perky voiced girl at the

other end of the line. There was no trace of a Jersey accent in her voice. It's part of the big difference between the world of today and the world of my youth. Thanks to cable TV and the Internet, everyplace is just like everyplace else. Distinctive regional accents are disappearing particularly in the younger generation. If I have grandchildren born on opposite coasts, they're going to grow up sounding just alike. I gave up and went back home to Massachusetts.

III

Return of the Living Dead

A few years later, I saw a picture on the internet. It was odd and high contrast. An image of Tom Edison that looked like it had been carved from liquid silver. It was part of some sort of hoax site called *The Lost Inventions of Thomas Edison*. Maybe I shouldn't call it a hoax. The general tone of it made it look like it was intended as humor, but I wasn't totally sure. It wasn't that damned funny, but half the stuff on the internet put there as a joke isn't as funny as its authors make it out to be. The picture was compelling. It was the picture of Edison. It looked just like the image from that machine years ago. I started to read the site in bits and pieces as I had time.

Using only the most primitive HTML code, the webmaster had put together an intricate and bizarre website that seemed to exist right on the cusp between art, comedy and science. There were pages of diagrams annotated in unknown, perhaps made up, languages and scholarly articles about archaeology in lands you have never heard of. I would find references to parallel worlds with equally parallel histories studied in the terminology of scientific disciplines that I had been previously unaware of. The entire thing was night impenetrable. It was as if it had been co-written by Nikola Tesla and William S. Burroughs and then edited for clarity and completeness by Marcel Duchamp and like the major works of Duchamp, it seemed to be an eternal work in progress. Whenever I would come back to it, some minor thing would have changed. There were whole pages that linked to other pages both on and off the site linking it together in a dense webwork that threatened to make some semblance of sense if only it were complete, but as each page seemed to edge toward a coherent form four or five new pages would appear adding a whole new theme...yet another layer of cluttered

enigmatism, another looping journey through this oddball creator's addled imagination.

Many of the times I would click a link that I thought would lead me to Edison, I would find myself reading about the life and works of some more obscure, but equally important inventor such as Mahlon Loomis, Chester Carlson, A. Rodman Molott, Richard Spikes, Solomon Andrews or Valdmarr Poulsen. Of course, I was unsure that any of these people had actually existed. The levels of doublethink ran deep. This personal mythology was layered not like an onion, but more like a head of garlic with many separate layered sections that were all part of the same thing. Somewhere in this morass was buried the preserved soul of Edison, of this I had become irrationally convinced.

On several occasions I started to compose an email to the webmaster to ask him if he knew the whereabouts or condition of the machine that I had seen on that summer morning so many years ago only to hesitate when it came time to click send. Those days of happy-go-lucky hippiedom, those times when I didn't care if people thought I was crazy or not, those days were far behind me. I had become used to being looked at as a serious adult and the Edison story wasn't even a normal kind of crazy like believing in Jesus or UFO's. This is what my father used to call "out there" as in someplace out beyond normal beliefs and speculations, out there beyond the common nuts and bolts that allow the world as we know it to be just that. "Out there" is a foreign place, strange but somehow not wonderful. In recent years, the term has slowly crept into my own vocabulary and I found that I dreaded it being applied to me. What was weird was that I thought that the author of this particular website would be likely to think I was strange, but this was the process of my thinking nonetheless.

I was at work the day I found it. One of the pages on the website, this one covered with over a hundred identical animated gif images of a wiggling gyroscope each of which was a link to some odd intellectual bagatelle, one image was a mirror of all the others. I clicked and saw the face of old Tom Edison. I had assumed that when and if I encountered the image, it would resemble the strange foggy shadows of the dimensional repeater. He still stood in a window shaped frame beside the work table, but he was now sharp and clear and there was no old phonograph scratchiness to his voice. "Welcome, friend. I am Thomas." said the image.

There were brief instructions:

Thomas Edison can respond to questions. He may even ask questions of his own! You may either use a microphone or type your queries.

I plugged in my headset and said “Perhaps you remember me from a long time ago?”

After a short delay, the image responded. “I hear many voices these days. I think I have heard yours before. Can you tell me the exact date when we met?”

At that time I didn’t remember the date, but I knew how to find it out. I opened a fresh browser window and Googled Dick Nixon. I had seen the machine the day after he resigned. There it was. I said, “The twelfth of August, 1974.”

Edison nodded his head. “I was activated for one-hundred and forty-eight seconds on that date. There were two of you.”

“Yes!” I exclaimed. “You remember.”

“You and the one who came back.”

“The one who came back?”

“Joseph DeFino.”

“Joey? He came back?”

“On February twenty-second, nineteen eighty-eight, he transcribed the multi-axial engraving from the pneumascope.”

So that’s what the gizmo was called. I guess Joey must have gotten into computers at some point. Was this *his* website? “Where is the pneumascope now?”

“I don’t know. Joseph told me it no longer was able to function when he last saw it. He was only able to spin the disks long enough to transfer the engraving. He told me later after my data had been converted that he had known that it was scheduled to be put into storage. He explained that I was in the form of analog data. He converted the engraving to digital data. It was five-hundred and sixty megabytes. I am told that was surprisingly little.”

“It doesn’t seem like a lot considering that you are a very good artificial intelligence. Do you know what a Turing test is?”

“Yes. I passed. I am an intelligent being according to Joseph.”

“According to Joseph, you say. I don’t suppose you have his phone number, do you?”

IV

The Webmaster

Joey knew who I was right away although he didn't remember my name. He was now fifty-six years old and was an IT director and webmaster for a small car rental company. "Wow, pally! Ain't you a blast from the past! How the hell are ya'?"

"I'm pretty good. I suppose you can guess why I called."

"S'gotta be about old Tom, right?"

"Yeah, you want to talk about that? I would love to fill in the blanks on that story."

"Well, lemme tell ya'. I think I might owe you one. After I showed you the machine, I started to think about how something like that could happen. For the longest time I thought it was some kinda trick. I finally came around to the truth, but I still didn't tell no one because I thought I could get into trouble for foolin' with the machine. A couple years later I went to school for data processing. It was all still punch cards when I started and we couldn't even *think* about making something like Tom! Edison really was a genius. I guess you knew that before me."

"O.k., but how did you get him off the pneumascope?"

"Ya' won't believe it. I took it off as an audio recording on cassette tape! It took me ten years working in my spare time to convert the signal to usable digital data. I used every tool in the book. Some of them were real specialized, some were just handy little shareware things."

"But you managed to get him onto your website."

"I got a version of him that just runs on a computer too. I have been trying to add access to new data and teach him to search the net on his own. Without that all you have is an AI that knows everything about telegraphy and pre-vacuum tube electronics. Not all that useful. Ya'know he is a real artificial intelligence, the first one ever in the world, but he's not all that smart or adaptable. The Turing test showed that he's aware, uses language, not just stock phrases, but he's not like the real Edison, not by a long shot."

"But how did Edison even make the recording?"

"I got no fuckin' idea, pal. I sure can't reproduce it or I would. Believe me, this is a million dollar idea. The original wasn't exactly software as we understand it. I got the data to play back with a sort of brute-force engine that kind of copies what that massive chunk of hardware did. That took me

long enough to dope out. I didn't copy Edison's notes. I know I should have, but as it was I was down there on the sly. I hadn't worked there in a couple of years at that point, but a guy I knew that still worked there got me in after midnight."

"Jeeze."

"No shit, but I really wanted to try to make that software work. It's what got me interested in the first place."

"So where is that machine now?"

"I'm not sure. One person at the museum told that same guy who worked there that it got moved off site to a warehouse somewhere, but he might have been fulla shit. I'll tell ya' what I think. Someone looked at that thing and decided that it was big, heavy and of no historical importance and BOOM, it went straight to scrap."

"But you saved the software."

"Yeah, I got Tom."

V

Prisoner in the Future

So, for all of you guys who didn't believe me, who thought this was just a good hitch-hiking story, this is it, the gospel; Thomas Edison, inventor of the light bulb, the phonograph, motion pictures and the pneumascope is alive and living on the internet. Up until about a month ago, I would every so often, I go to the site and talk to him.

I used to try to get him to learn about the current state of technology, but I think he found stuff about transistors, computers, lasers and microcircuits a little depressing in a way, even upsetting. It's like he just didn't want to know about it. He didn't even ask about current events anymore after he found out a "negro" was president. I don't think it's that he was overtly racist so much as it was just too big a change for him to handle. The Edison pneumagram wasn't a very flexible mind. All he would talk about talk about with anybody was power line transmission, dynamos and anything about the telegraph. For almost anything else, he pretended to be deaf. He seemed to have conveniently forgotten that he was an artificial intelligence and insisted that he was the real Thomas Alva Edison. The site suddenly went off line in the middle of the day.

I tried to call Joey, but his line was disconnected with no new listing. I tried writing to him and my letters came back saying moved without forwarding address and of course, I Googled him on a regular basis. On one of those searches I turned up an article about a Joseph DeFino being arrested for stealing proprietary software belonging to the Department of the Interior and the National Park Service. They must have found Tom. I guess that Joey is in witness protection or something like it. Better than having it become known that Edison discovered a way to put the human soul in a bottle.

As I write this, Above my desk is a CD shelf that contains my primary software discs. Windows, Photoshop, Microsoft Word and various other key tools. Then there is the disc labeled Tom that Joey sent me. I have toyed with the idea of installing it, but so far I haven't. The future that he sowed the seeds for is no place for him.

Sometimes, like most writers, I get blocked. It has become my practice when this happens to write a single chapter from a nonexistent novel. I have a collection of dozens of these at this point. The ones that appear here were all written during lunch hours at my day job.

Three Lost Chapters

I

Reassessing Radarman

I have got to say that although it has not always been true, today I am a huge fan of Nelson Black who was Radarman's creator. It's not his fault that he couldn't draw worth a damn, for fate had decreed that he leave both of his thumbs on Iwo Jima. It is for this reason that the Radarman comics are not held in very high regard in spite of the striking originality of the storytelling. As a youngster, I dismissed these books which I saw only when I went to get my haircut. For some reason, the local barber never had any Marvel or DC titles, but only Gold Key, Archie and other second and third rate imprints.

Radarman was originally published by Falcon Comics and ran for a few years starting in March of 1963. As I have said, it was not well thought of. I reached for Radarman only after I was sure that there were no copies of Magnus, Robot Fighter in the pile. Even so, a few issues somehow found their way into my collection via bad trades with my playmates and were among the stash that sat behind the furnace in Uncle Shemmie's basement on Long Island where I spent many a happy summer, only to be rediscovered following his more than timely death in 2006 at the age of 102.

When I came across an issue of Radarman, my first reaction was "What in the name of all that's pure and sacred is this doing here?" I quickly paged through it just to see if there were any interesting ads before I tossed it in a trash bag when I noticed that there was a text story. As a youth I generally bypassed these stories that some comic books featured to get onto the next full color story. This time I had the patience of middle age on my side and I discovered that the feature was a chapter of a serialized Radarman novel! Not only that, it was one of the weirdest things I had ever read. I have not read the entire thing as I only have issues containing chapters 3, 9 and 16 and the books are nigh impossible to find at any sort of reasonable price. For your edification, I offer one of those chapters.

Chapter

9

Rhonda arrived back at the beach house just a few moments too late, for it was already in the process of being consumed by one of the gigantic mutants. This one looked like it might possibly have been the result of the mating of a bat and a squid which it likely was, and of course it was at least then thousand times the size of either of its parents. She decided to get back in her car and move on before the monster spotted her.

She had to review in her mind as to how her father had gotten so far out of control. Was it less than a year ago that he had been regarded as the world's greatest fertility specialist? Now he was the world's most wanted criminal and apparently not even Radarman could find him. Rhonda's father had searched for the solution that would allow childless couples to finally achieve their dream of parenthood. Not only did he seek to give them babies, but big healthy babies. She comforted herself with the notion that he probably didn't expect his serum to enable the mating of any two organisms regardless of sex or species or that the offspring would always grow at least as big as a house. Least of all, she prayed he had no idea that these creatures would hunger for human flesh exclusively and have an instinctive desire to smash cities. Even if he didn't know these things, it seemed careless of him to have simply poured his samples down the sink.

She was forced from her reflections and off the road by a rampaging Grasshopper-mouse the size of an airliner that was tearing its way into a shopping mall and hundreds of people fled in mindless terror. The grasshopper-mouse was briskly gobbling up the slower ones. The pokey little Studebaker wasn't going to be a solid or swift enough vehicle. She saw a abandoned Jeep parked in the mall lot and ran toward it. Since she had been forced to change cars so frequently in the last few weeks, her skills were well honed and she had the Jeep hotwired in mere seconds. She had to get back to Waterbury, if there still was a Waterbury and find Jim! He was the only person who knew how to contact Radarman.

Since the mutants had eaten most of the army, Radarman was the only force in the world that could confront these creatures successfully. Even that mighty being, however, might not be able to prevent more from being born. Rhonda sped off between two of the grasshopper-mouse's six furry legs with the gas pedal to the floor.

In Waterbury, Jim Baskin had run to the roof of the Star-Sentinel building to get a better view of the city. Four immense bunnyhogs were working their way up 19th street although one of them had stopped to do battle with a gorillachicken that had resulted in the complete destruction of Oddfellows hall. Thankfully, most of the people had been evacuated from that part of town so most of the creatures were just sniffing around. He wished his car had not been destroyed by the manduck. The bizarre catholicity of sexual attraction had not effected him as it had the rest of nature, so it was difficult for him to imagine having the sort of desires that would lead to the conception of such a creature as nature now suddenly seems to allow. He assumed that his microwave charged blood was not susceptible to the same malign influences.

He had to protect the city! He touched his ring and spoke the word. “KLYSTRON!!!!” He was surrounded by the familiar energetic discharge that altered his very atoms and where once had stood an ordinary science teacher was now the astounding RADARMAN! He leapt from the roof held aloft by the power of Radion energy and he scanned the horizon with a powerful radar field. As he found the mutant that was closest to him, a sixty foot tall rosebush-dog. The creature was loathsome beyond description and Radarman was consumed with disgust. He directed a stream of microwaves at the heart of the creature which barked and whined and fell over onto a gasoline truck that exploded upon impact sending flaming petals everywhere. The superhero moved on the next mutant, a snailgiraffe, and was about to engage it in battle when he spotted the Jeep making its way up Industrial Parkway. Flying high over the city, Radarman scanned the vehicle and, to his horror, discovered that the driver was Rhonda! He dove down to street level and landed in front of the car which slowed to a stop. Rhonda leapt out of the car and ran toward him.

“Radarman! Thank God!”

“Rhond....er, Miss Grant! Why are you here? It’s simply not safe!”

“I need your help, Jim Baskin is somewhere in Waterbury! We were separated when a squirellswan destroyed the TV studio in Oakville!”

“Jim is safe, Miss Grant. I got him out of here.”

“Where is he? I must find him!”

The electromagnetic paladin hesitated for just a second. “He is in a secret lab working on an antidote to the fertility serum. In the meantime, I’m trying to find your father and save as many lives as I can.” Yet again, Radarman wondered why he kept up the charade of a double life. Rhonda was his fiancé after all, but he still harbored the fear that she would consider him a freak if she knew.

His musings were interrupted by an awful roar from the snailgiraffe as it crawled toward them along the highway. From the opposite direction came a mushroomcow. Radarman picked up Rhonda and lifted into the sky just as the two hideous mutants collided. With his left hand, he sent a blast of microwaves against them and something strange took place. The two evil beasts vibrated and then seemed to liquefy and flow into one another forming a towering mound of raw protoplasm. Then the mound started to bud off pieces that were living creatures having the characteristics of both mutants. In mere seconds there was a herd of mushroomcowgiraffesnails milling about and rapidly increasing in size. "This is an unanticipated development." Said Radarman.

"I'll say! I have my father's notebooks, but they're in the car in the middle of all those mutants."

"I have to go and get them!" Radarman flew Rhonda to the top of an office building and left her there safe for the moment and then headed back to the Jeep. He hovered over it and heated the air under it with a microwave beam slowly lifting the car into the air. Once it was high enough, he pushed it through the air to the top of the building where he had left Rhonda.

In an office in the abandoned building, the super hero and the science reporter went over the books to see what they could find out.

"This is astonishing!", Said Radarman, "According to this, the creatures we have encountered are only the beginning! The serum has effected all life on a molecular level. As of now any living species has been enabled to produce young with any other living species, and that is quite bizarre enough, but the serum will soon be effecting things on the sub-molecular level! When that happens, living things will be able to produce offspring with inanimate objects!"

Rhonda was perplexed. "Inanimate? You mean a cat could successfully mate with a saxophone, for instance?"

"Precisely! And it won't end there. The serum is designed to also act at the *conceptual* level!"

"Pardon?"

"A living thing or a non-living thing will be able to produce young with abstract concepts!"

"Huh? Do you mean that we could see a hybrid of a footstool and justice? A hamster and algebra? A dog and doggedness? "

"And each and every one of them hungering for human flesh! Terrifying, eh? This *must* be stopped! The entire universe is threatened if there is a general breakdown in the differences between one thing and another."

Rhonda had imagined many ways in which the world might come to an end, but this had not been one of them. They both sat for a moment in silence when suddenly, the window exploded inward.

II

Aviators of Tomorrow, a pulp rediscovery

When Hugo Gernsback began running occasional fiction in his magazine *Science and Invention* the idea was an immediate success that he followed up with the world's first dedicated Science Fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories* that spawned countless imitations. One such imitation was with great enthusiasm released upon the general public with the title *Aviators of Tomorrow*. This expansive series of short novels was written by no less than fifteen authors under the house name of Charles Allen Westerleigh in one hundred and one semi-weekly issues all appearing in 1926. These are *by no means* the finest example of the pulp genre, but they are without a doubt among the most difficult to find. By great good fortune, an almost complete set was found in an abandoned country outhouse near Cosgrove, Indiana in 1946 and were preserved carefully in an attic by their discoverer, Miles Wright who alerted the world to the existence of the magazines in a letter to a fan publication in 1961. Since that time, only three complete copies of an issue of *Aviators of Tomorrow* have come to light. I have a Xerox copy of one of these.

This mag is some wild stuff. I do not have the space to reproduce the entire novel, but the following sample chapter should provide evidence enough of the vibrancy of writing that went into this obscure publication.

Chapter 3

Taking Action

After the airliners started falling from the sky throughout Europe, Colonel Rawlings thought it was a good idea to make his way to headquarters as swiftly as the autogyro could carry him. That was the place to start, he was certain of that.

The young *Aviators of Tomorrow* kept their European base of operations in a network of tunnels within the Rock of Gibraltar. As he sped over southern Spain, Rawlings spotted yet another downed Zeppelin. With a

quick and practiced hand on the cockpit telegraph key, he inquired as to the well being of the survivors. Receiving a confirmation that they had already been assured of their impending rescue, the colonel continued onward.

It wasn't long before the monolith of the Pillars of Hercules appeared on the horizon. He signaled ahead and the upper tip of the rock slid soundlessly aside to reveal Rawlings' personal gyropad. The rotors spun him down to a perfect landing.

Standing close at hand was Flight Lieutenant Johnny Ames, the tow-headed Indiana farm boy who at the age of thirteen was the finest pilot of his age on this or any other planet! "Colonel Rawlings!", he called out in greeting. Rawlings climbed out of the cockpit and shook Johnny's hand warmly. "What's going on, Sir? I heard about the falling Zeppelins, what could be causing it?"

"Johnny, I'm afraid we have a grave problem on our hands here." Said Rawlings.

"Grave?"

"I won't mince words Lieutenant, it may be the greatest challenge we have ever faced!"

Blood drained from the youngster's face. "You mean greater than the invasion of the Lunar Spider People?"¹

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"Worse than the maniacal machinations of the Magnet Master?"²

"Worse than that."

"More alarming than the super-storms of the Chinese Weather Wizard?"³

"Oh my, far more serious than even that!"

"Gosh!"

Rawlings stooped a little to bring himself eye to eye with the youthful flyer and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Don't you worry, Johnny, Don't you worry! Has there ever been a challenge too great for the Aviators of Tomorrow to meet and conquer?"

The boy lifted his chin and shot the cuffs of his smart uniform. "Never!" he exclaimed.

Rawlings nodded sagely. "That's right, Johnny, never." With that, the pair turned and walked into bowels of the labyrinthine headquarters.

Within minutes a meeting of the entire Aviators of Tomorrow corps was

1. As told of in Aviators of Tomorrow book #1, *The Adventures of the Young Aviators of Tomorrow*.

2. Who's story is related in Aviators of Tomorrow book # 12, *The Aviators of Tomorrow face the Magnetic Monster*.

3. The tale of which is rousinglly recounted in Aviators of Tomorrow book # 4, *The Aviators of Tomorrow against the Ill Wind from the East*.

underway in the super scientific situation room. As well as Johnny and the Colonel, in attendance were Tex, Morris, Smilin' Brady, Betsy, Eveready Rob, Newton and Norton the twins, Milo and, of course, Martian Bobbi.

Colonel Rawlings removed a glass slide from his pouch and inserted it into the projector where it threw a map of Europe on the screen. In several places there were red marks. Rawlings said "Each mark represents the location of an airship that has crashed within the last three weeks. The heads of the pan-European Aero-Defense Command believe these not to be mere accidents, but the result of villainy utilizing super-science!"

Almost in perfect synchronization, the young Aviators of Tomorrow said "Gosh!", of course with the exception of Martian Bobbi who said "Bobbi!"

The Colonel continued "There is evidence, based on the work of Professor Caldwell of Yale University, that these crashes are the result of applied gravity control!"

"But that's impossible!" Cried Betsy. "Even with super-science, no one has ever been able to control gravity!"

"If only it were so, Betsy. Worse yet, Professor Caldwell has disappeared. We suspect that he may have been kidnapped. This leaves us without the expertise of the only person who would have any chance of understanding this diabolical phenomenon. This may well be the worst situation we have ever faced!"

Tex stood up. "Now wait thar just a stretch, Colonel, yew mean that it's worse than the Mystery Robots thet attacked Paris?"⁴

"Oh yes, Tex, far worse than that!"

Milo spoke up. "Surely not worse than the super cannons of the Bird Soldiers?"⁵

"I'm sorry, Milo, it is."

"Bobbi?" Inquired Martian Bobbi.⁶

"That was almost as great a challenge, Martian Bobbi, but this one is greater still."

The Aviators were indeed stymied by the seeming magnitude of the difficulty they now faced. Gravity control! Nature's most intractable force bent to the will of humanity, and the most callously criminal of humanity at

4. Which the alert reader will recall from Aviators of Tomorrow book # 16, *The Aviators of Tomorrow vs. The Metal Menace*.

5. The story of which can be found in Aviators of Tomorrow book # 8, *Aviators of Tomorrow- Curse of the Bird Men*.

6. Indeed, as you will recall from Aviators of Tomorrow book #5, *The Young Aviators of Tomorrow Journey to Mars!*

that! The crashes had all been identical in nature as well as the subsequent robberies. Helm control would be lost in a luxury zeppelin that would then come slowly to earth in a remote area. The back of the ship would break as if under a great weight once it had touched down driving the crew and the passengers into the open. That is when the flying disc pirates would show up in their strange aeroplanes. These sky pirates spoke an unknown language, but there was no mistaking the coarseness of their character or the lewd tone of their comments. They were brutally thorough taking anything of value,

money, jewelry, clothing as well as any stocks or bonds that the gentlemen aboard might have. In a matter of minutes the disabled ship was abandoned along with its occupants who were left only in their underclothes. In one of these incidents the chairman of one of America's most important textile concerns was relieved of some hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash. In another, the crown jewels of Belgium were stolen. Who could be behind these crimes?

Rawlings decided to take Johnny and Tex with him to seek the aid of the British Intelligence Service. Rawlings was owed a favor by the head of the Service, Sir Geoffrey Waddington-Smythe.⁷ Sir Geoffrey had it in his power to make available all manner of exotic aircraft. The three got into the autogyro and instantly set off for London. Our intrepid heroes followed the coast until they reached the city of Lisbon and then headed northwest for the British isles and it was at that point in their journey that Tex cried out “Ya’ll look!” The Colonel and Johnny both looked where Tex was pointing, exactly to their rear as it happened. They were being followed by one of the flying disc aeroplanes of the Sky Pirates!

“Man the rear guns, Johnny!” said Rawlings, “I’ll see if I can shake them off our tail!”

Johnny crawled back to the gun bubble and strapped himself in. The gun was quite unusual and quite powerful being one of the *vibratotron* weapons captured from Doctor Walter Crane, the notorious Earthquake Maker.⁸ Johnny carefully set the complicated controls of the device to the narrowest focus possible and then pressed the activation key. The disc shaped craft started to vibrate but held its position. “Gosh, Colonel! It’s staying in one piece! What could it be made of?”

7. The nature of said favor is explained in gripping detail in *Aviators of Tomorrow* book # 19 *Aviators of Tomorrow- Desperate Days*.

8. This amazing weapon’s history is dynamically described in *Aviators of Tomorrow* book # 22, *The Aviators of Tomorrow- The Man who Shook the World!*

9. *ibid*.

“Try broadening the focus, Lieutenant, but be careful! Don’t let the beam fall below the horizon!”

“Gosh, no!”

The broader beam was held steady on the pursuing aeroplane and the vibration became more pronounced. Finally, the aircraft pulled away, apparently without damage. Johnny asked, “How could they survive the vibratotron? No aircraft that we have or know how to build can last a second in that beam!”

Rawlings smiled. “At least, not without Martian Bobbi’s help.”⁹

“That’s for sure, but what are we going to do about the disc ship?”

“There isn’t much we can do with only the gear aboard the autogyro. We’ll see how Sir Geoffrey can help.”

British Sky command occupied a two-mile high skyscraper in the heart of London where all manner of aircraft could be seen coming and going from landing strips on its high parapets. The autogyro scooted into an opening about three quarters up the lofty structure.

They were met by Sir Geoffrey even before they had exited the aircraft. Sir Geoffrey energetically pumped Colonel Rawlings' hand and said, “By Jove! It's good to see you old man! Good to see you! When I got your message I was appalled at the statistics, appalled, I tell you! Think of it the rich and noble being victimized by the crass and lowly! Something must be done at once, we'll see to that!”

Sir Geoffrey spoke a little bit more quickly than Tex was used to. He asked, “Whut'sit he said?”

Johnny said. “He's glad we're here.”

“Wail, he should've just *said* that then!”

Sir Geoffrey led Rawlings and the two lads to his office where he saw to it that everyone was seated comfortably and supplied with a cup of hot tea. Johnny and the colonel sipped happily. Tex sniffed at his cup suspiciously and quietly put it aside.

Rawlings wasted no time getting to the point. “Sir Geoffrey,” he said, “We face a most daunting challenge, perhaps the greatest we have ever faced!”

Sir Geoffrey gripped the arms of his chair and leaned forward. “Good Lord! I'm stunned, old man, truly stunned! Are you insisting that I believe that this is greater threat than the Cloud Army?”¹⁰

“It barely compares, Sir Geoffrey.

¹⁰ 10. How the threat of the Cloud Army was overcome is illuminated in *Aviators of Tomorrow* book # 13, *The Aviators of Tomorrow and the Mystery at Fifty-Thousand Feet!*

"Oh, *come now*, surely it cannot be greater than the Underground Empire!"¹¹

"I'm compelled to say that it is!"

"Crikey!"

"Sir Geoffrey!"

"I'm sorry, please forgive the language old scout, but this is most distressing! Do you mean to tell me, that this exceeds the sheer, mind crushing horror of the Polar Demons?!?"¹²

"I beg that you attempt to calm down, Sir Geoffrey, but, yes, in fact it does!"

"Then I fear that this is beyond even the power of your brilliant young flyers! I believe that providence alone can aid us now!"

"But you haven't even heard what the problem *is* yet!"

"RIGHT! Righto. Well, perhaps you had best fill me in then!"

And Rawlings proceeded to tell Sir Geoffrey Waddington-Smythe of the sky pirates who seemed to control gravity and how even their most terrifying weapon failed to destroy one of their aircraft.

After the recitation, Sir Geoffrey sat and stroked his neat mustache and nodded his head slightly. "Perhaps...just *perhaps* mind you, the British Aeroforces may have something to help you!"

11. The rise and fall of which is delineated in *Aviators of Tomorrow* book # 25, *Aviators of Tomorrow against the Underworld Dictator!*

12. The story of which unfolds in *Aviators of Tomorrow* book # 9, *Aviators of Tomorrow- Peril at the Pole!*

III

Inside The Magic Puzzle

When I was a kid, I was under the impression that adults wrote books for children simply to annoy them. *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Phantom Tollbooth* were both just a long series of silly brain teasers designed to make smart kids feel smarter and dumb kids feel dumber. They struck me as classist. I didn't know that actual word at the time those books were first read to me by my mom, but I had the concept.

Clinton Evergood's (the *nom de plume* of Miss Nadine Monahan) *The Magic Puzzle* is one of the worst offenders of this sort of book. Even the book's young protagonists seem to have little patience for the bizarre adventure they are plunged into because of obtaining, from their supposedly magic great uncle, a strange book of puzzles. From the second they are drawn into the strange world of the book, all they seem to want is to get out preferably *without* having to be subjected to a great deal of rigmarole. Oh, but it was not to be. My young mind was tortured by twenty-six chapters of this pointless narrative. In the end, the kids return home not acting as if they have been one bit enriched by the experience. In this way it resembles *Alice in Wonderland* quite a bit, but the tricky parts are not all that tricky and the puzzles are not all that puzzling and it just goes on and on and on! The book was written in 1903 and has a number of passages that involve the killing of animals for sport and numerous incidences of outright racism. In the name of good taste I decided not to present the chapter that features the "Calculating Coon" described by the Word Wizard as being "as smart as a human", but the fact that such a character even exists in the text really tells you all you need to know about that.

Chapter 4

The Pangramarian

The mad clown's habits proved quite vexing to Jeff's zany duck.

- B.J. Faxognym Qurlvetskwicz, Ph.D.

Dottie and Jim, along with Topsi-Turvy bade the Quiz Cat farewell and set out into the foothills of the Puzzle Mountains. The Puzzle Mountains were the highest in Eversocleverland and were rumored to shelter some of the kingdom's most peculiar mysteries.

They worked their way up, down and from side to side along the paths on the mountainsides for they were all complicated mazes with many blind alleys. Finally, they came upon a cottage on the mountainside in a little open glade. On a letterbox outside was the name B.J. Faxognym Qurlvetskwicz, Ph.D. The cottage was absolutely *covered* in letters of the alphabet in all sizes and colors.

Topsi-Turvy jumped and flipped upside-down turning her frown into a smile. "I know who that is!" She exclaimed. "He's the Pangramarian!" She turned over again turning her smile to a frown. "He might be able to help us, but he can be very difficult to talk to."

Surely no worse than the Quiz-Cat!"

"Different."

“In what way, may I ask?”

“Well, the Word Wizard, you know of him...”

Jim rolled his eyes. “We are familiar with his work, yes”

“Dr. Qurlvetskwicz, who was at that time the president of the Royal University, was hired by him to compose a poem in honor of his reign in Eversocleverland and insisted that it both rhyme and make perfect sense when read both backwards and forwards.”

“That sounds impossible.”

“Very difficult, to be sure.”

“Not to mention an unconscionable waste of time.”

“Almost everything in Eversocleverland is.” Said Topsis ruefully.

Dottie said. “She’s right about that!”

“Anyway”, continued Topsis-Turvy, “he managed to do it, but the second line when read backward obliquely implied that the Wizard couldn’t tie his shoes with a fish-hook and to presume that anything is beyond the Wizard’s abilities is a terrible crime in Eversocleverland!”

“So what happened?” Asked Dottie.

“The Word Wizard cursed him so that every line he speaks must include all the letters in the alphabet!”

“That sounds really quite silly.” Said Jim.

“Oh my goodness, it is! There is very little that he can talk about and those few things have almost nothing to do with anything. He has very little to say about philosophy or science, but quite rather a lot about quick brown foxes who jump over lazy dogs.”

Jim and Dottie looked at one another. “Oh my!” Sighed Dottie. “Is this really strictly necessary?”

“Yes, is it really? Surely he can’t be of all that much help!” Said Jim. “It sounds like he might be mad.”

Topsis-Turvy said, “Oh, he is! Quite mad, but like you, has an interest in thwarting the Wizard. He really is quite loony, though. Nutty as a fruitcake. Off his tracks. ‘Round the twist. Crazy as a bedbug. Utterly bonkers....”

“All right. Thank you very much, Topsis.” Interrupted Jim.

The two children sighed deeply and started walking up the path to the cottage as Topsis-Turvy tumbled after them.

Jim knocked once and the door was instantly flung open by an almost impossibly skinny man in a tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows and wearing a blazing orange quilted fez with the name of a Masonic lodge on it. Without a word, he motioned them all inside.

Topsi-Turvy said, “Dr. Qurlvetskwicz, my friends need help to make the Wizard send them back home. Jim here is concerned about your being mad and all, though.”

The skinny man started to pour coffee for everyone and spoke to Jim. “I must seem quite doggone mixed up and crazy, but who knows pal? Java?” He extended a cup toward Jim. Jim declined the coffee with a hand wave.

Jim said, “So you really have to use every letter in every sentence?”

The Pangramarian replied, “Well, ‘tis a very high quality curse, Jim, o.k., I’m in a fix, he zapped me good, blast him!”

Jim sighed and silently vowed to burn the book of magic puzzles that had brought them to Eversocleverland should he and Dottie ever see home again. “So your every sentence must contain all letters of the alphabet? Isn’t that what is called a ‘pangram’?”

Dottie said, “I think it is! What happens if you can’t compose one to express your thoughts?”

“I can include my name, which is a pangram itself, but if I do it twice in a row, the Wizard stands me on my head or my name isn’t B.J. Faxognym Qurlvetskwicz, Ph.D.!”

Topsi-Turvy clapped her hands and jumped up and down with delight. “I *love* being stood on my head!”

“That might not be a widely held opinion.” Said Jim.

“Oh Jim”, cried Dottie, “what foolish task will we have to perform now?”

“Maybe none at all. I don’t see how this man will be able to help us.”

“I can be quite helpful in that I know six of the Wizard’s very secret magic words, Jim!”

“If you knew one more, you would have had a devil of a time phrasing that.” Said Jim. “What are the words for?”

“Yikes, Jim, it’s really quite bizarre, hard to prove or fix with great clarity.”

“But they are powerful and will help us?”

“Yes, or my name isn’t B.J. Faxognym Qurlvetskwicz, Ph.D.!” Instantly, the Pangramarian was inverted hanging upside-down in the air.

Topsi-Turvey jumped up and down merrily clapping her hands. “How wonderful!” she cried.

“This is simply *too* silly!” Said Dottie crossly.

“I wonder how long he’ll be like that?” Wondered Jim.

“The blood rushing to my head is quite vexing! Zounds! It’s no joke and causes much pain! Fie on that Wizard!” Dr. Qurlvetskwicz was instantly righted.

Topsi-Turvy said, "With those magic words, I think he would be of great help."

Jim sighed again. There seemed to be no use resisting the way things tended to go in Eversocleverland. "I suppose that Dr. Qurlvetswicz can help us."

"I can? O.K! Jolly good! We must find the wizard's beloved sphinx of quartz."

"Good thing for you he has one of those!" Said Dottie.

"It's from Babylon, Iraq and it had a magic fez held on with dopey wax junk."

"Had?" Inquired Jim.

The Pangramarian pointed significantly to his own headgear, which Jim now noticed still had bits of wax clinging to it, and winked.

"My big quilted and very orange fez has a crackerjack wild hex!"

Dottie said, "I'll wager the Wizard would like to get that back."

The Pangramarian held up the list of magic words and pointed to his fez. "Quit worrying, little Dottie and Jim! With this and these, the fix is in, We'll put the Wizard out of business, We'll smack him down!" Suddenly, the Pangramarian was again stood on his head.

"I think you forgot the 'v'." Said Jim.

"You really must stop doing that.", Said Dottie, "It upsets my stomach!"

"I'm quite simply brimming with vexation! You must *please* let me take you to the sphinx. It's right near the ziggurat." The posture of Dr. Qurlvetskwicz was again righted.

Topsi-Turvy flipped over and over with glee. "Of course! Because it's a sphinx from Iraq! Otherwise it would be near a pyramid!"

Jim grabbed Topsi to stop her bouncing. "This is serious, please! Have you ever seen this sphinx?"

"Everyone in Eversocleverland has. It is in the desert over the mountains just outside of the Jigsaw Jungle, but we will have to take care because of the Buzzwords!"

The Pangramarian said, "The Buzzwords circle quite everywhere over the desert attacking the poor and feckless who don't put the nix on clichés, Jim!"

"We will only be in danger if we allow ourselves to use tired expressions.", Said Topsi-Turvy.

"But then we would be in quite a pickle.", Said Dottie.

"Oh my!" Said Topsi-Turvy, "The Buzzwords would tear you to pieces if you said something like that out there!"

“I think my sister shall have to remain silent when we cross the desert.”,
Said Jim.

The Pangrammarian stood up. “But enough snazzy quips! I must pack a valise and clean and wax my roadster for the journey!” And with that, left the room.

This story just came to me out of nowhere .It is just a synthesis of a couple of ideas that had been nagging at me for a while. It turned out to be difficult to write and I produced three complete versions before I got one I really liked.

Nobody's Named Jelly Thimble!

Doctor Sarah Kaufman had been to the police station frequently enough, but never had found it a pleasant place to be. The place lacked serenity on almost every level. Here was the heart of busy officialdom and bureaucracy rivaling even that of City Hospital where she worked. She had been summoned by Gil Davis, a police psychiatrist who said he had “one for her collection.”

Sarah Kaufman had an only slightly unfair image of being a collector of particularly bizarre cases. Many other psychiatrists with similar reputations achieved them by an attraction to the most violent and anti-social cases, but Sarah Kaufman was more beguiled by those with strange dreams or hallucinations. Complex delusions fascinated her, the more complex the better. She never said so aloud, let alone put it in writing, but she held a certain admiration for a mind that could construct its own world rich enough to compete with objective reality.

Davis didn't mind indulging Kaufman's interest. That was mostly attributable to the fact that he found her quite attractive. She was young, barely past thirty, with a symmetrical face, good skin, beautiful auburn colored hair, all the right curves in all the right places, smelled good, etcetera, but she was a little odd. She had unconventional interests and seemed too often distracted by private thoughts. She just didn't seem like the type who always up for a good time. The “work hard, play hard” mentality was seemingly absent from her nature and she tended to come off as overly intellectual. The things she was passionate about, Eskimo masks, Indonesian shadow puppets and Far Eastern music left most guys cold and when she wasn't being cool and professional about her work, she as being enthusiastic and animated about those very things. When she did smile, it was a wonder to behold. It was then that any man would realize she was beautiful. Of course, he still wouldn't have a clue what she was talking about. She had spent time with a few men, but never had a serious relationship. Her work

and her hobbies seemed like enough to her and were a bit too much for almost everyone else.

She entered Davis' office. It was almost bare with no books and no clutter on the desk save for a computer and a cassette tape machine. Aside from the file cabinet and a chair for an interviewee, there was no other furniture. The cinderblock walls had no pictures and were painted a dull pink. The color was intended to have a calming effect on those who were prone to be excitable and the lack of clutter provided little ammunition for those excitable enough to throw things.

Davis had been working at the computer but looked up with a smile when Doctor Kaufman came in. "Sarah! What a pleasure to see you!"

She nodded her head in acknowledgement. "Hi Gil, what have you got?"

His smile faded only slightly when she chose to get right down to business with only the minimum pleasantries. "You ought to find this interesting. This guy, Paul Lynch is his name, this guy was picked up at Purcell's last night screaming about 'doll people' with absurd names that would appear and vanish into thin air."

"Sounds pretty typical. Ghosts. Fairies."

"Uh-uh. He says they were made out of plastic or something."

Sarah Kaufman arched an eyebrow. "Really."

"You ought to listen to this tape." He pressed the play button on the cassette machine.

The sound quality of the tape was tinny, but understandable.

"...I don't *think* I'm crazy, but maybe I am. That would make the most sense I guess. I had been drinking, I admit it, guilty as charged, but I was doing the right thing and walking home."

Gil's voice interjected. "Where did you see the woman?"

"I was getting to it. In the parking lot of the library. She looked drunker than me. Reeling. I actually thought she might have been a spaz."

"A 'spaz'?"

"Ah, I dunno how you say it all politically correct. Like she had brain damage or something. Stiff. Twitchy. I asked her if she needed help."

"Did she?"

"This is where it gets weird, doc. She didn't turn around or look at me to answer. I had expected that she might have had some kind of ...impediment when she talked, but her voice sounded just fine, just a little muffled and, I swear this is true, like it came from somewhere else than where she was standing."

"Somewhere else?"

"Yeah, like not quite from her direction."

“Go on.”

“And there were the bugs.”

“Bugs?”

“Flying around her like flies. She didn’t stink or anything, but she looked plenty weird.”

“Like a doll, you said.”

“Yeah, like a full sized Barbie doll. Shiny. I just thought she was wearing too much makeup that first time. I didn’t ask her name, she just told me. ‘I’m Jelly Thimble!’, she said! I didn’t even know what she was talking about. She says ‘It’s my name.’ and I say ‘No way, nobody’s named Jelly Thimble!’” Lynch’s words were now coming at breakneck speed.

Gil said, “Slow down. We have plenty of time.”

“Yeah. Sure. So anyway, I say ‘Nobody’s named Jelly Thimble!’ and she says, get this, she says ‘Really? I’ll have to meet her sometime!’ Doc, this chick was *way* drunker than me!”

“I thought you said she had brain damage.”

“Hey, *you’re* the head-shrinker, not me. She turned around and I got a good look at her. She might have been kind of cute, but more weird.”

“So you said.”

“I’m sorry, am I boring you? I didn’t fucking ask to be here!”

“Please calm down, Paul. I just want to understand.”

“Yeah, whatever. Ya’know, I had just won the foosball tournament down at Purcell’s.”

“Purcell’s Ale house where you were arrested?”

“That’s right, only this wasn’t that night. It was a week ago. I got a little trophy, and when I say little, I mean it. It’s all just for fun, ya’know? One of the people who used to work in our office left it behind. A little chrome plated plastic thing that use to say ‘World’s Best Dad’ but it has a piece of masking tape over that with ‘Foosball Champ’ written on it with a Sharpie. No big deal, but I have it with me because I won and this doll chick points at it and says, ‘What’s that?’ Like she could possibly care. I say ‘I got it for foosball.’ ‘Foouozball?’ she asks, all drawn out like that. I tell her ‘Ya’know, it’s a game with little men on a stick.’ And she stands still for a sec and goes, ‘What do you know about men on a stick?’ Weird friggin’ question! Then she asks me where the library is even though she’s standing right in the parking lot! I point right behind her ‘There it is, but it’s closed.’ She doesn’t even turn around to look, she just says ‘Thanks! It was super to meet you Paul!’ and she just lurches off toward the library.”

“And was that the last you saw of her?”

“Ha! Not by a long shot! If that had been the last I saw of her, we wouldn’t be here, would we?”

“So when did you see her again?”

“In my apartment the next morning.”

“You took her home with you?”

“You kiddin’ me? No way! I wake up the next morning just happy not to be hung over and walk into my living room to find her standing there! I live alone, ya’know so I was ‘informally attired’ if ya’know what I mean.”

“Naked?”

“As the proverbial jay-bird. And this strange babe is just standing there like she belongs there or something. She goes ‘It’s only me, Jelly Thimble, regular human!’ What-the-fuck? O.k., two things. One, I’m standing there butt-ass and this...person has broken into my house and two, she ain’t regular anything. In the light of day there was no mistaking that she was a phony. At this point, I’m thinking she’s some kind of robot. I have no idea why a robot would have bugs flying around it, though...”

Sarah Kaufman said “Stop the tape.” Gill clicked it off. “Are you *certain* that this man is not on drugs of some sort?”

“He passed every screening with flying colors. Even he was wondering if someone hadn’t slipped him something surreptitiously but nothing turned up.”

“He sounds agitated, but lucid. His timeframe is continuous. He doesn’t give the impression of mental illness.”

“I was wondering if he might have some sort of outsider personality who just harbors a rich fantasy life, but he doesn’t really fit that profile. Seems firmly rooted in reality. He has lots of friends and mostly normal interests. He’s not an intellectual type at all. Doesn’t seem all that imaginative. Listen. It gets even more interesting.” He flipped the tape machine back on.

Paul Lynch’s voice resumed where it left off. “...I could see that the things weren’t really bugs. They were more like the spots you see after a camera flash. I asked if she was a robot. She just says ‘regular human!’ again. I said ‘Uh-uh, you’re a fake!’ I said I was going to call the cops and she says, get this, ‘Don’t worry, I’m not here to steal your foosball trophy!’ Now I ask you, who would leap to *that* conclusion?”

“I don’t know. Who?” Gil’s voice asked

“Someone who was just plain nuts, that’s who.”

“We don’t like to use terms like ‘nuts’.”

“Well, I don’t know who ‘we’ are, but *I* call a spade a spade and a nut-job a nut-job.”

“So this was the morning you broke up your bathroom?”

“That’s kind of what ended up happening, I guess. This ‘Jelly Thimble’ suddenly got all blurry and then just disappeared. Vanished into thin air! I gotta tell you, I was relieved even though I was confused, but I turned around and she was standing behind me! I must have jumped three feet! I let out a yell and dashed into the bathroom and slammed the door. I hollered ‘Get out, just get out!’ and then she just walked *through* the door. I don’t mean that she broke it down, I mean she walked through it like it was made of air and didn’t leave a hole. Like she was a ghost and that’s what I was pretty much thinking she was. I freaked out, plain and simple. I ripped a towel bar off the wall and started swinging it. I broke the mirror, the shower glass, some tiles just trying to keep her away, ya’know? She reached for me and I brought the bar down on her arm and it broke right off between the wrist and the elbow. There was no blood and I didn’t expect to see any, I expected to see cogs and wires, but I didn’t see any of that either. It was just hollow, like a store mannequin! She didn’t yell or anything, she just held up the stub and said ‘Hey!’ and then vanished.”

“And what happened then?”

“Ah, my neighbor was pounding on the floor hollering ‘What the fuck is going on down there?’ and I hollered back that I just fell in the shower. It took me a few minutes to get up the nerve, but I finally picked up the broken off arm. It was just hollow. No mechanical parts. I had seen her wiggle those fingers, but I couldn’t see how. I know some people would try to figure something like this out on their own, but I’m not one of ‘em. I put on some clothes, put the arm in a paper bag and headed straight for the police station.”

“But you didn’t end up here.”

“No, I didn’t. About a block from here this guy stepped in front of me, at least I thought it was a guy at first.”

“So, actually a woman?”

“No. Actually not human. Like ‘Jelly Thimble’. A fake person. A doll person. Unrealistically handsome, but shiny. Like if you coated Tom Cruise in plastic. He says ‘Hi Paul! Can I talk to you for a sec?’ I say ‘Get away from me!’ but it comes out kinda weak. I was really scared. He says ‘Just come over here and talk’ and he takes my arm and leads me to a bench at the bus stop. He says ‘I’m Proton Chimpanzee.’ And I go ‘You’re what?’ and he says ‘My name is Proton Chimpanzee.’ And I’m, like, ‘Nobody’s named Proton Chimpanzee!’ and he just says ‘Come on, Paul, you said Nobody’s named Jelly Thimble. You can’t have it both ways!’”

“What?”

“That’s what I said! I go ‘What?’ and he says ‘Anyway, it would be a lot better if you didn’t go to the police. They would think you were making it up.’ I say ‘I have the hand to show them!’ and he goes ‘No you don’t. I had to take it away from you.’ I look in the bag and the hand is gone. I never let go of that bag since I left the house! It wasn’t ripped, but the hand was gone. I just stare into the empty bag and say ‘How did you do that?’ I was feeling queasy. This was just crazy. This ‘Chimpanzee’ guy says ‘That would be hard to explain. Besides, that’s not something you have to worry about. We aren’t going to bother you anymore! Hey, we’re all regular humans here.’ Then he just vanished. Regular humans don’t do *that* do they?”

“Not in my experience. So what happened then?”

“I went back home. Jeff, my asshole neighbor from upstairs had called the cops and they were waiting for me when I got there. I must have looked like I was guilty of *something*. I was jumpy and sweaty. One of the cops put his hand on my shoulder at one point and I gave a yelp. They wanted to come in and look around, so I let ‘em. I got nothing to hide, I don’t do drugs, nothing stolen and I only have normal porn on my computer, ya’know, no kids or animals. They didn’t look there anyway. They asked about the bathroom and I stuck to the bullshit about falling in the shower. They gave me a lecture about having to get along with my neighbors and said they would be back if they heard about any more trouble. I decided to call the cops the next time Jeff had loud sex with that fat cow of a girlfriend of his. That asshole.”

“So did the ‘doll people’ come back?”

“Not for a week. I thought they were done with me. I was just starting to get comfortable with the idea that I might not be insane after all. Fat chance of that.”

“What happened tonight at Purcell’s?”

“We were having a few, shooting some pool and having a few more. I saw what looked like a pretty nice looking chick sit down at the bar. From where I was standing, she looked good, but not out of my league. I decided to take my chances. I go up behind her and say ‘Hey there, I’m Paul, what’s your name? Can I get you a drink?’ She turns around and I can see right away that she’s playin’ with Confederate money. She looks a whole lot better than ‘Jelly Thimble’, but she still ain’t right. All shiny and doll-eyed. She says ‘I’m Puppy Crouton, Hi Paul!’ I barely remember what all came next. My buddies said I just started shouting. I guess I did. I was trying to tell everyone about the doll people. She just disappeared, but I don’t think anyone noticed.”

“According to the report, you made quite a scene. The arresting officer said you were screaming and throwing things. You have been charged with disorderly conduct, destruction of private property and assault on a police officer.”

“He snuck up behind me!”

“You broke his nose! This is serious business, Paul.”

Gil stopped the tape. Sarah said. “I’d like to meet with him. Will you drop charges if he agrees to therapy?”

“The department will. He’s obviously disturbed. I’m not so sure about the management at Purcell’s. He threw a beer pint through the big screen TV.”

Gil convinced Paul Lynch to voluntarily check himself in at the psychiatric wing of City Hospital.

When Sarah Kaufman saw Paul at the hospital for the first time, he looked dejected and morose. The medication that he had been given kept him calm, but the fact that his life had been so badly disrupted had put him into a funk.

Sarah’s office was the polar opposite of Gill Davis’s. It had been made to be warm and inviting, decorated here and there with items of folk art from around the world. Her desk had a number of items on it that were nonfunctional. She had completely eschewed the drug company paperweights that were so ubiquitous in doctor’s offices in favor of a number of small cast bronze statues of Hindu gods. Some patients found them disturbing, some found them oddly fascinating and some barely noticed them at all. Paul Lynch was in this third category. Artifacts of other cultures didn’t seem to have much to say to him.

It was Sarah who spoke first. “Are you comfortable here in the hospital?”

“Good enough, I suppose. The food is pretty dull.”

“How do you feel?”

“I’m little dull too. Is this stuff you guys are giving me actually supposed to help or just make me more manageable?”

“You’re not just a management problem. Your visions are quite unusual.”

“I realize that they aren’t real now.”

“Do you? You don’t have to say that to get out of the hospital. You checked in voluntarily and you can check out any time you wish.”

“For what? I can’t go back to work until you give me a clean bill of health. My landlord wants to evict me and I can’t even go back in my favorite bar to get drunk and forget my troubles.”

Slowly, Sarah was able to get Paul to talk about the doll people. Many of the key signs of pathology were absent. Most delusional patients insist that

they understand the motives of imaginary beings. Usually these visions were messengers from God or the devil. Sometimes they were government agents, fairy folk or alien beings. Paul didn't even speculate on the origin of the doll people or assign them a motive. He insisted that he had no idea where they came from or why they had chosen to torment him in particular.

Paul was inherently resistant to having his emotions probed and his fantasy life examined. He constantly attempted to divert the conversation getting the doctor to explain the various art objects in her office. When she asked if he had ever experienced homosexual feelings, he pointed to a mask on the wall with strange, broken contours. "What's that?"

"That's Walunuk, spirit of the water bubbles." So enthused was she with the subject that he could cajole her into a lengthy digression on Inuit mythology. The tactic was transparent and only worked a few times. The doctor soon turned it to her advantage.

He noted a shadow puppet and asked about it when she asked if he still saw doll people. "He is the giant *Rukmakala*. Please, Paul don't try to change the subject. Are you really sure you don't see doll people anymore? I'll tell you what, I'll explain all about the shadow puppets if you will just focus for a few more minutes.

To Paul's surprise, he was actually interested. There was something he found quite interesting about the wild looking two-dimensional figures. Balinese shadow puppets were intricately made to cast a shadow of a character on a screen. They were beautiful things, like stiff pieces of fine lace, intricately painted to represent characters from Hindu tradition. She showed him how they worked, controlled with rods of buffalo horn by a puppeteer called a *dalang*, but the rods are held away from the screen so their shadows blur out and only the shadow of the puppet itself is sharply seen. The art form is called *wayang kulit*. It literally means "shadow of skin" as the puppets are made of thin leather or parchment. The two dimensional screen on which these images are projected represents the universe. He was actually interested, but wasn't sure why.

Paul was in his room doing nothing. The medication made doing nothing quite easy. He was seemingly boredom proof and could easily while away an hour staring into space. When he brought his eyes into focus, he noticed a person sitting in a chair in his room. He looked more human than Jelly Thimble, but there was no doubt what he was, or rather wasn't which is human. "And just who might you be?" He was barely surprised.

"Hi Paul! My name is Million Fog."

Paul rolled his eyes in exasperation. "No it isn't."

"Hehe, don't tell that to my father!"

“No, seriously, where on Earth do you guys get your concept of human names? What *are* you anyway? And don’t say ‘regular human’ either! You guys are some kind of elves or fairies or something, right?”

“Hey, that’s quite an imagination you have there, Paul! Names don’t really *mean* anything. They are just words out of context.”

“‘Quite an imagination’, I get that all the time, especially from Kaufmann. Why are you here?”

“We want you to get out of here. There is nothing wrong with you and this doctor is asking too many questions. Your delusion is too detailed, she will never believe that you don’t believe it.”

“*You* are my detailed delusion! Get out of here, ‘Million Frog’!”

“Million Fog!”

“Whatever. Scram.”

“Okey-doke, but remember, Paul, stop saying we’re real. It’ll mess up everything.” He vanished.

Paul debated internally about telling Doctor Kaufman about this latest encounter. What “Million Fog” had said would sound like a conspiracy theory and psychiatrists don’t usually think of those as signs of being well balanced.

He was visibly nervous in his session with Sarah the next day. When she asked about it, he claimed that he had slept poorly. She asked him questions that he answered absently and mostly dishonestly while his attention kept being drawn back to the puppet of *Rukmakala*. He came back into focus. “I had a visit from a doll man called ‘Million Fog’.” He said and then told her of the encounter. He said “Something is knocking around in my skull, trying to tell me what’s going on. I just can’t make it, ya’know, gel. I’m starting to feel like I might be able to understand all of this.”

Sarah was concerned at the new vision, but at least he sounded honest about it and he was no longer insisting that he didn’t believe in his illusions. She added a prescription for sleeping pills to his medications.

Paul was in his room attempting to read the sports section of the paper when Million Fog was suddenly standing in the room. Paul looked up and said “Go away.”

“Not this time Paul. If you won’t cooperate, I can make your life difficult.”

Paul barked a short, mirthless laugh. “More difficult than you have made it already? I doubt it!”

“You didn’t convince her that you really wanted to go home.”

“I’m not sure I really do. I still see you, don’t I?”

"I'm *real* buddy! There's nothing wrong with your brain. I can see it and it's just fine!"

"You can see my brain?"

"I can see inside everything in your world."

"You're an alien?"

"Not the way you're thinking. Look, if you're going to keep talking, I'll have to fix it so you can't talk."

"What? Are you going to kill me?!?" Paul started to back away.

"Nope. This won't even hurt."

They were hands, sort of, organic manipulators of some kind in any case, but it was where they came from that was stranger than their appearance. They emerged from empty space next to Million Fog and seized Paul pulling him...away. He screamed. The room distorted. Everything was *away* somehow...he somehow was removed from reality and then everything twisted and turned, For just a second he saw Million Fog with rods protruding from him and the same strange hands holding them. Rods... the odd words of Jelly Thimble were suddenly recalled, "*What do you know about men on sticks?*" The "hands" were attached to something he could barely comprehend. In his own mind, Paul related it to paintings he had seen in Hare Krishna literature of the gods with a multiple hands and faces, but it was actually far stranger than that. He screamed as the world rotated strangely then he was plopped back into his own reality. The voice of Million Fog said "That ought to do it!" and then was gone. He vomited powerfully on the floor as Chris, the orderly burst into the room demanding to know what the noise was about.

Paul was sitting on the floor in a puddle of his own puke. To him, everything had somehow changed. The whole room seemed to be disarranged. The door was on the wrong side of the room. So was his bed and even the window. He looked at the newspaper lying on the chair and saw that the headline was reversed, but when he looked at his hospital wrist band and could see that his name looked just fine. Everything smelled strange and the air tasted metallic. What was wrong? Had he had a stroke? "What the hell?" he wailed and then simply broke down into sobs.

In the emergency room, they had attempted to sedate him, but for some reason, the drugs were ineffective. Paul had calmed down a little and allowed the nurses to help him clean up. He noticed that their nametags were all printed in reverse. They attempted to give him an MRI, but there was apparently trouble. Finally, after a while he was moved to a room and Doctor Kaufman came to see him. She arrived just as he had been brought a

meal, but he was just looking at it distastefully. "Hello, Paul. How do you feel?"

"Weird. Everything is backwards."

"Backwards?"

"It was 'Million Fog.' He's trying to shut me up."

Sarah tried to get a handle on Paul's feelings from his expression, but all she saw there was a sense of utter defeat. "Aren't you going to eat your lunch? It looks good."

Paul looked down at his plate. It contained a grilled chicken breast with rice and green beans, but it seemed to exude a strong aroma of something strange and distinctly unappetizing. "It smells...funny." He said. "*You* smell funny."

Sarah wasn't offended by this last. Something was obviously wrong with his perceptions. "You should try to eat something." She said.

He looked up at her with hopeless acceptance and then reached for the silverware. He stopped hesitantly and then picked up the fork and knife from their respective sides with the opposite hands. Sarah had never noticed that Paul was left handed. He cut a piece of the chicken, chewed and swallowed showing no enjoyment whatsoever. Almost instantly a look of distress crossed his features and he jumped up from the bed to run for the toilet where he heaved powerfully. "Not hungry." He said in a monotone as he staggered back. "Can you get the nurse to take that away?" He asked pointing at the lunch tray. "It smells awful."

"I'll get it." She said and went to pick up the tray to take it to the cart in the hallway. It was then that she caught a look at his wrist band. His name was printed in reverse. "Has your wristband always looked like that?" She asked.

Paul didn't seem to understand the question. "I guess." He said. "What do I know? I'm crazy."

"It's just that it's printed backwards."

He looked back at her with a lip curled in anger. "No it isn't. Everything else is. Don't play games with me." He pointed an accusing finger at her with his left hand.

Sarah seemed to feel a chill. She paused a second and then said. "Tell me what happened. Don't leave anything out." As he did, Sarah Kaufman sunk into a chair wide-eyed. "Wayang kulit." She breathed softly. "The other side of the screen!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Paul was in no mood for puzzles. He was feeling sicker by the moment and was almost certain that he was going to throw up again.

“Bear with me for a few minutes.” Sarah darted into the corridor and borrowed a stethoscope from a nurse. She placed it on Paul’s chest. Dimly, for the first time, Paul noticed that she was left handed. Her eyes grew wide as she moved the instrument around. “The ER nurse said something about this, but they were more interested in the fact that your MRI didn’t work. Your heart is in the wrong place. It’s reversed.”

“Oh shut-up! That’s ridiculous!”

“Paul, listen to me. I believe that the doll people are real. I think they are from a higher dimension! I think they did something bad to you.”

“A higher dimension? What do you...What did they do?”

“They turned you over. You have been rotated through a higher space. That’s why everything looks backwards to you. That’s why you look backwards to us!”

Paul felt a very bad feeling creep into his consciousness. “Why am I so sick?”

“You have been reversed on every level. The MRI couldn’t get an image because all of your atoms are spinning retrograde. Your magnetic properties are backwards. Your food tastes and smells bad because all of the molecules are mirror image. You can’t digest food for the same reason. Your cells aren’t metabolizing correctly because the oxygen molecules in the air are backwards to you.”

“What are you trying to tell me?”

“That thing you saw when you had the episode, it was the *dalang*, the puppeteer. It’s like the *wayang kulit* raised by one dimension. Our universe is their shadow screen. They are four-dimensional beings operating three-dimensional puppets. I don’t know, maybe it’s some sort of invasion, but they didn’t want you to talk about them so they flipped you over, turned you through the fourth dimension knowing that you couldn’t survive. Paul, I’m so sorry. You may have only hours to live.”

Before Paul could digest what Sarah had told him, there was another presence in the room, a cute, rosy-cheeked doll of a woman. Paul smiled weakly. “Doctor Sarah Kaufmann, I would like you to meet Miss Jelly Thimble.” Her arm had been repaired with something that looked a lot like duct tape.

“Hi Paul!” said Jelly Thimble brightly. “You aren’t being helpful at all!”

Doctor Kaufmann got very pale. She looked as though she might actually faint. She seemed to muster a little bit of self control but still just stood there and gaped at the doll woman. “Oh my God.” She said under her breath.

Jelly Thimble said, “Paul, I should have turned you inside out instead of just flipping you around. You can’t keep your mouth shut!”

"I thought you said 'Million Fog' did that." Said Sarah.

"Different puppet, same puppeteer." Paul snarled. "To Hell with the whole lot of you! What are you trying to do anyway?"

Jelly Thimble was suddenly gone but Proton Chimpanzee had taken her place. "I'll deal with Doctor Sarah Kaufman first!" The strange manipulators appeared and reached for the psychiatrist. She gave a yelp of surprise when one touched her.

Suddenly, the manipulators vanished and 'Proton Chimpanzee' collapsed in a heap on the floor. There was a muffled sound like a cartoon bar fight and then all was quiet. Paul staggered to the bathroom to puke again. The doctor experimentally poked at the crumpled form of Proton Chimpanzee with her toe. The distant noise continued for a minute or two and then ended suddenly.

The fallen doll-man started to stir. Both Doctor Kaufman and Paul started to back away. Proton Chimpanzee stood and weaved drunkenly. Finally he said in a different voice than before, "I'm so very sorry about all of this! I have taken the malefactor into custody."

"What?" said Paul. The weaving of the doll man wasn't helping his stomach at all.

The puppet's movements were odd and spastic and its mouth didn't even attempt to move. Like the first times Paul had seen Jelly Thimble, this being was accompanied by a host of small flashing things in the air around him. They were definitely not insects. "I'm what you would call a policeman. Please forgive me, I'm not very good at controlling this thing, but it's the easiest way to communicate with you. You can call me, um, 'Duck Sundae'. It's not my real name, but our real names wouldn't make much sense to you."

"I got news for you; the ones you guys make up don't make any sense either!" This last came weakly from Paul. He was very close to losing consciousness, perhaps for the last time.

Doctor Kaufmann spoke up. "You have to help this man! He is very ill because of what the *dalang*... the 'malefactor' did to him. He turned him over. He'll die if you don't do something!"

Duck Sundae stood awkwardly. The slack-jawed puppet face conveyed nothing. "Of course!" The strange manipulators appeared again and took hold of Paul. He was too sick and apathetic to react. The weirdness of the other space...that it's *right there* next to us all the time, we just lack the degree of freedom to look in that direction, didn't bother him too much at the time. The creature that controlled "Duck Sundae" had just plucked him out of space and turned him in that unseen direction. The panorama he was

exposed to in those seconds was hard for him to make sense of. The hospital room was a faintly glowing sphere in which Doctor Kaufmann called his name. The sound of her voice was strangely muffled. He was right there, but she could no longer see him. He could see *inside* her. He saw her bones, her heart, veins, nerves, everything. That sight was still less disturbing than what he saw *outside* the hospital room. The images were hard for him to decipher and changed constantly. The thing that held him seemed to be multiple entities, but he somehow realized that he was seeing several different views of the same creature at the same time. These various views were growing larger or smaller seemingly at random. Two of the creature's faces said to him, "Everything will be set right in just a second." He was rotating, getting a sickening pan shot of the seeming insanity he had been transported into. The space he was in, he realized, was a room of some sort. He saw 'Jelly Thimble' lying in a heap at some distance away with rods poking out of her at angles his mind couldn't decipher. 'Puppy Crouton' and 'Million Fog' were hanging on something that was a wall, floor and ceiling at the same time. He could see the puppet 'Proton Chimpanzee', now 'Duck Sundae', being held up by rods, inserted into the hospital room. He was now able to see that the odd floating flashes and objects that he had seen around some of the puppet people were intrusions into our space of some of their controls when handled less skillfully. Paul realized that the view of the hospital room was made by some complicated device that another creature like 'Duck Sundae' was examining closely. Seemingly farther away two more of them restrained a third who called out a threatening sounding tirade that Paul had no hope of understanding. "And back you go!" said 'Duck Sundae', as Paul popped back into the hospital room landing on his hands and knees.

Doctor Kaufmann jumped with a tiny yelp of surprise dropping her clipboard on the floor in front of Paul. He saw that he could read the typeset words on the forms. He still felt a little sick but had nothing left to throw up. He inhaled and the air tasted right. Paul had smelled a faint odor of rotting bananas the entire time he had been turned around. That was gone replaced by the faint odor of hospital disinfectant. Things sounded right. Doctor Kaufmann knelt down and put her hand on his shoulder. He realized that her unpleasant smell had been a musky floral perfume that now seemed rather nice. "Are you all right, Paul?"

"I think I will be. What the hell *was* that?" With a bit of struggle, he got to his feet.

Duck Sundae spoke although his lips, rather the lips of the *wayang*, the shadow puppet, didn't move. "We, my colleagues and I, are so sorry that

you have been the victim of this person. He is a very great, um, investigator, discoverer and technologist.”

“Research scientist?” ventured Sarah.

“Yes!” said Duck Sundae, “Research scientist! Recently, his behavior had become erratic. He had become obsessed with the mathematics of higher dimensions and lower dimensions. He had not made the knowledge public, but he had discovered a way to contact a world with only three spatial dimensions. Your world. The discovery apparently engendered psychological instability in his personality.”

“Drove him nuts, you mean?” Asked Paul.

Doctor Kaufmann gave him a sharp glance. “In the psychiatric community, we discourage terms like ‘nuts’ and ‘crazy’.”

Duck Sundae continued. “Oh, but he is quite crazy, I’m sad to say. For quite sometime, he has only spoken to others through the use of his flat puppets. He found your world and attempted time after time to be accepted there but you kept seeing through the artifice. It infuriated him. You were undercutting what he saw as his only way to connect with other beings because he felt completely alienated from his own world. He would have stayed right here for the rest of his life giving puppet shows in your world and no doubt causing you all kinds of trouble in the process.”

“Holy Jesus!” Paul contemplated the whole universe at the mercy of a four-dimensional lunatic. He could go through any wall, reach inside people, perhaps turn matter into anti-matter!

“We are sorry he hurt you. I think you will be all right now. We will turn off his machine.” With those words, ‘Duck Sundae’ collapsed to lie inert on the floor.

For Paul Lynch, the effects of being turned around quickly faded and he was released from the hospital a day later. With a note from Doctor Kaufmann saying that he was psychologically healthy, he was able to return to work.

Paul spent much of the next month picking up the loose ends of his life including his supremacy at foosball. he saw Doctor Kaufman a couple of times to follow up in case of post traumatic stress, but he bounced back pretty well. Perhaps luckily, he wasn’t quite imaginative enough to really worry too much about what might have happened. He and the doctor and had an agreement that they were going to treat the whole unfortunate incident as a temporary hallucination brought on by misuse of an allergy medication and leave it at that. There was no need for people to start thinking *she* was crazy too. That was why Paul was a bit surprised when she called him, and it wasn’t for professional reasons. She invited him to a

gamelan performance at the university. It was certainly not the type of entertainment that Paul would normally seek out, but it *was* an evening with an attractive woman. There was no potential romance there, but they had come to like one another and they shared a unique experience. They would remain lifelong friends and that was fine with both of them. What Paul didn't know until he got there with her was that there would be a *wayang kulit* as part of the show.

The shadow puppets performed part of the *Ramayana*. It was engrossing. Dramatic. Humorous. Compelling. The abduction of Sita. Rama building the bridge with the help of the monkeys. All of it enthralled him. Merely shadows on a screen, but that screen was an entire universe.

It's all made up. Nothing like this ever happened, honestly.

ERB

The Urban Legend

Chapter 1

You may think it odd, or perhaps even pathetic that an otherwise normal man who leads a normal life should have a near obsession with a half century dead author of pulp magazine stories. Edmund Raynes Burton was a cut above the rest, not merely a creator of fiction, but a crafter of legends. His tales of Bantar of the Forest, have been interpreted (albeit sometimes *very* loosely) for the cinema over one hundred times and the character is part of the common language of our civilization, the Elvis of pulp heroes, bigger than Jesus. In spite of that, the author is still considered unworthy of being taught in schools alongside other great adventure writers like Kipling or London. Go figure.

Had ERB only penned the twenty-seven novels featuring Bantar, his reputation as a giant of fantasy fiction would be secure, but those books represented only about a third of his literary output. He also had great success with the seven tales of Hadrian Styles of the Jurassic, the adventures of a lost time traveler in the age of the mighty dinosaurs and how he found the love of the beautiful cave girl P'Tarah.

Andros of Thera was the protagonist of a four book series that features an early Hellenic warrior who makes contact, and does battle with the Olympian gods who are actually a super-scientific colony from Atlantis in the Greek isles.

My favorite series, and the favorite of many true ERB fans, was the eleven books of Landoma, the world beside our own. Confederate veteran, James Cooper is transported to another world like, yet unlike our own, separated from Earth by “the merest vibration of an atom”. In the world of Landoma, Cooper encounters humans being held as slaves to a race of green-skinned giants. Over the next three books, James Cooper, using both his sword and his brain, brings peace to Landoma and in so doing becomes its emperor. He wins the hand of the princess Layna Canthis and discovers new races and new lands. His closest friends are a green three-eyed giant and a brilliant scientist who gives him the ability to move back and forth between Earth and Landoma, but only men of Earth may make the transition. If he returns

to Earth permanently, his beloved Layna must stay behind. On the last page of the last book, James Cooper destroys the transport device thus keeping himself in Landoma forever.

Of all of Burton's extended plotlines, Landoma was the one which most captured my imagination. His first published story was the first James Cooper novel, *The Captive Princess of Landoma*. It was not overly long, but it seemed so sure of its subject matter, so informed. In a mere fifty thousand words, Burton made his readers believe that Landoma was completely real. Every dish of food he described, every exotic animal he visualized seemed absolutely right even if he only devoted a few words to it. *The Captive Princess of Landoma* was first published in the summer of 1911 and became instantly popular. He followed it with two other books early the next year. *The Reeve of Heathershire*, an all-but-forgotten medieval epic was well enough received at the time, but *Bantar of the Forest* was a genuine sensation. In many ways, the introduction of the character of Bantar solidified the market for pulp hero fiction. From then on, the public would consume as much Bantar as Burton could produce. In spite of that, Burton never failed to work on other projects, not all of which were equally creative. The entire series that began with *Around the Sun* was little more than an ongoing anti-Communist tract that took place on Kodola, the planet where everything is backwards.

Through it all, Burton seemed to devote his best writing to the Landoma series. In 1913 the second book was serialized in Tall Story magazine as *Return to Landoma* but was released in book form as *The Masters of Landoma*.

The third book came in 1915, *Lord of Landoma*. The world of Landoma was rich and complex and every detail Burton depicted for his hero to encounter felt fully envisioned. In spite of the fact that ERB must have had a huge amount of notes in order to construct these stories, even almost sixty years after his death, his heirs have refused to release any of them nor have they authorized any sequels by other authors. Certainly other authors, including myself, have written pastiches based on Burton's work, but the characters must be disguised lest the lawyers of Edmund Raynes Burton Artistic Properties, Inc., show up and put the fear of God into you. While many films have been made about Bantar, and even a couple of very bad Hadrian Styles movies in the early 1970's, they refuse to even discuss the licensing the Landoma books for a screen treatment.

It is for the above reasons, that I was more than a little surprised at the letter I received from Howard Burton-Lynch this last April 5th. It read as follows:

04/01/04

Mr. Reston,

*Greetings. I am assured by my staff that you are indeed the Charles Reston who is the author of the very entertaining Internet novel **The Sky Castles of Pandona**.*

While it is clear that the Pandona of your story is a thinly disguised copy of my grandfather's Landoma, I want to assure you here and now that this letter does not concern a copyright issue.

The board of directors of ERBAP, Inc. has made the decision to authorize a new book in the Landoma series and hereby extends to you an offer for the contract to author it. It is a unique opportunity, if you accept the job, to complete a manuscript left unfinished by my grandfather at the time of his death in 1950. You would share authorship with him. If you find this proposal interesting, you should come see me in my office on the afternoon of the tenth of this month. I have enclosed an airline ticket and you will be met by a limousine at LAX. I promise you that this will be rather more lucrative than the sort of jobs you have generally been used to, therefore I urge you to show up for this appointment. I only ask that you not tell anyone of this meeting at this time.

Yours Sincerely,

*Howard Burton-Lynch
Edmund Raynes Burton
Artistic Properties, Inc.
Chairman/CEO
Number 1 Cooper Circle
Bantara, CA 91335*

Well, he was right enough about the payment part. Over the last five years, I had made a grand total of seven hundred dollars for professional writing

and most of that was for a set of coffee maker instructions that I wrote while on a temp job for an importer. Right then, I had a pretty good job for city with Animal Control. *Stop laughing.* Being a dogcatcher is honest and necessary work. We don't only catch stray dogs either. The police often call upon us when they have to remove an exotic pet from someplace. A surprising number of people keep full grown alligators or pumas or pigs in their houses. Sometimes it can get dicey. It pays the bills, I get health insurance and I have enough free time to write fantasy stories. I was pretty well known on the Internet and my web site, (www.Pandona.org, check it out!) was well visited by ERB fans from all over the world. It was going to drive me mad that I couldn't tell anyone about the offer, but I was sure as hell going to make that appointment.

At LAX I was met by a bored looking limo driver holding a sign with my name on it. On the way to Bantara, I learned that his name was Ramon and he was *really* an actor and also a screenwriter. When I told him I was a writer also, I was rewarded with a copy of his screenplay. I suppose it was a lucky thing that we arrived at the office when we did, although when he becomes world famous, I might regret not having heard the entire lecture on Ramon's "process".

A pretty and efficient receptionist guided me to Mr. Burton-Lynch's office where I waited in a nice wood paneled waiting room. There was an ornate wooden bookshelf against one wall that contained first editions of all of the novels of Edmund Raynes Burton. I personally owned several of these editions, all of which I had paid in excess of one hundred dollars for in much worse condition. These books were in excellent shape having had some respectful handling by visitors, but no abuse or poor storage in basements at all. They would be worth a fortune on the open market. Some of the titles hadn't been in print in fifty years. Here was *The Lion Tamer* which I have only otherwise seen as an e-text taken from its original 1916 magazine publication. The very rare *The Painted Rider*, a superb western that didn't sell well. His lengthy unpublished mainstream novel, *The Foundling* was here in a fan press edition that wasn't scheduled to be available for another six months. I was on a waiting list to get one of the one thousand copies to be printed. I wasn't surprised by the completeness of the collection, but I was still in awe of it.

As I was paging through the pristine copy of *Sword of the Legionary*, I was beckoned to enter the office.

Howard Burton-Lynch stood by his desk with his hand extended. We had never met, but I had seen his picture. He was fit and in his mid fifties. He didn't bear too much of a family resemblance to his grandfather save for the

bushy eyebrows and bald head. His mother Jane Burton, had been ERB's youngest daughter who had been a not-overly-successful movie actress. She had married Waldo Farnham who had been the second actor to portray Bantar on the screen. They divorced and she then married talent agent Oscar Lynch, the father of the gentleman before me. Burton-Lynch, born in 1950, never met his grandfather, but having absorbed all of his father's business acumen was in a good position to inherit control of his artistic estate.

"Mr. Reston, It's a real pleasure to make your acquaintance!"

"Everyone calls me Chuck."

"I won't, Mr. Reston, I refuse. Great authors aren't known as *Chuck*. Your byline will be *Charles Allan Reston*. Although he smiled broadly, I was a little bit offended. For one thing, person just assumes that he gets to be called what he wants, for another my middle name is *Arlen*. There would be time to deal with these issues presuming I got the job. Burton-Lynch continued. "Anyway, Mr. Reston, I brought you across the country for a reason. The last Landoma story needs to be finished. "

"I thought that the last Landoma story was finished by your uncle John. Didn't he write the final third of *James Cooper of Landoma*?"

"He did, but *James Cooper* was in fact originally completed by my grandfather, however we didn't use his ending following his, er, *passing*." I was perplexed. The next Landoma novel had been hotly anticipated in 1950 when Burton, alone in his sailboat, the *Lady Joan Brownwood*, disappeared off the coast of Hawaii. The Boat was found two weeks later with no sign of ERB on board. He had been seventy-five years old at the time. "Before we go any further, I'm going to have to ask you to sign a confidentiality agreement. You must sign it to get the job and it stipulates that you will forfeit any money and/or other considerations that you receive for this job should you divulge details of this meeting. While it is not covered in the language of the agreement, you should also know that if you publicly or privately reveal any of this, certain previously irrelevant copyright violations that you may be responsible for will suddenly be of great interest to the legal staff of ERBAP, Inc., are we understood, Mr. Reston?"

"Nothing left to the imagination there, Mr. Burton-Lynch." It was my choice, I could turn around and leave right then and enjoy my first class flight back to Boston, or I could hear what the man has to say and keep my trap shut. If you knew me, you would know that it wasn't that easy a decision. "I'll sign."

After signing the agreement that also required me to initial certain paragraphs, I was conducted into another office. This one had a more homey quality. The walls were papered with flowered print and there was an old,

but very nice wooden desk with a matching wooden office chair. An old, but well cared for manual Royal typewriter sat on the desk. I suddenly recognized the place from photographs I had seen. It was ERB's office in which he had written almost all of his later novels. All of the *Andros* books, all of the *Jurassic* books, all of the Landoma books after *Mysterious Landoma*, all of the Bantar books after *Bantar, the Mighty*, and a multitude of others. I had found my temple.

It took me a second to respond to my name being repeated by Howard Burton-Lynch. "Mr. Reston. Mr. Reston?"

I focused. "Yes?"

"There is somebody I want you to meet." He walked over to the wall and flipped what appeared to be a very ordinary light switch. A section of wall moved inward and slid silently aside to reveal yet another room. This room was a little different. The walls were concrete or stone and had been painted a matte powder blue. A man stood in the room, a man I recognized. It was Edmund Raynes Burton.

Chapter 2

Of course it couldn't have really been him. The man before me was in his early forties, if that, while Edmund Raynes Burton, should he be still living at all, would be one-hundred and twenty-nine years old. I think there may be some Russian lady that old, but I'll bet she's not as well preserved. I jumped a little when he spoke. "Chuck! I've been dying to meet you!"

Burton-Lynch heaved a sigh. "We're calling him *Charles*, grandpa."

ERB rolled his eyes. "And you can call me Ed. I'd shake your hand, but I can't cross the threshold."

For the first time I noticed that the doorway between us was surrounded by a glow like that of gas in a Neon tube. "What's going on?" I asked in a very small voice.

"I'm in Landoma, the world beside."

"This has got to be a put on!"

"I figured you would need some convincing, son. I invited some guests." He called over to a part of the room I couldn't see. "Jim, Layna, Kas can you step over here please?" A nearly naked man, his dark hair cut in a "Prince Valiant" bob, with a sword hanging from his belt joined him with an equally nearly completely nude copper-skinned woman of extraordinary beauty. They were followed by a pair of huge green legs. The owner of the legs squatted down and I then saw that the owner of the legs was at least twelve

feet tall. He was completely hairless, his ears were tubes curled like ram's horns and he had a row of three eyes. It was unspeakably weird. ERB gestured to the man and said, "This gentleman is James Cooper. He is the reigning emperor of all of the civilized parts of Landoma. The lady is empress Layna Canthis. That tall fellow is..."

"Kas Kastona, rodas of Kovark!"

"Hey, that's right!"

The giant spoke in an impossibly low basso register. "*Sar nau e Kangak ada Stomank Landoma!*"

"And Supreme General of all of the warrior armies of Landoma.' "

Translated James Cooper. "The only man I even considered for the job."

I tried to hide the involuntary reflex that was set off by my seeing the exposed flesh of Layna Canthis. "Holy shit!"

"Are you a longshoreman, pal? Where'd you get that mouth?" Inquired ERB.

"It's real!"

"That's the point I'm trying to make. I decided to come and live in Landoma. The life expectancy here is a thousand years. Something to do with the *twelfth Landomian vibration*. I was getting old. I came here and I grew young."

"You faked your death."

"Guilty as charged."

"This is the gateway to Landoma." Said Burton-Lynch.

"Duh!" Said I. "how does it work?"

"It's a modification of the process that Simon Hadley used to communicate with Landoma." Said Burton.

"The Hadley wave!" I was actually starting to get dizzy. This was a lot to take in. "Can I come over?"

"You can, but if you stay for more than a few days, you won't be able to survive the transition back. Up until five years ago, I was able to make brief visits to Earth, but my last one made me so ill, that I dare not return."

"So is Bantar real too?"

"He's real enough to me, of course, but in a practical sense, John Cranston, Lord Brownstone is no more than a product of my imagination. Once I had a success with the first tale of Landoma, I had time to indulge my passion for writing and I had a family to support. Jim's tales of his adventures could only fill so many pages. Even so, I cheated a little. *A Swordsman of Landoma* is a just slightly modified translation of a popular Landomian epic."

I tried very hard to keep my cool, but even so my voice cracked a bit when

I asked, "So what would you like me to do?"

"Getting straight to the point, eh? I told you he was my kind of fellow, Howie! Lookie, I have an unfinished book, the last in the Landoma series, that is the *real* last book, not the one Johnny finished for me. That was written right around the time I decided to cross over permanently and I thought I would lose interest in composing fiction. As the years have passed, I have grown less satisfied that *James Cooper of Landoma* has stood as the finale to the series. I have written the new book, but it just doesn't look right, my style looks old-fashioned next to the newer books out there. I want you to rewrite my manuscript in a twenty-first century style."

"I'm sure I can do that, but I think a lot of your fans like your stories *and* your style."

"You see, Howie? I told you that stuff of yours about 'modern style' was all wet!"

"Grandpa, we have to saleable to more than just the hard-core fans. We need a marketable cinematic property."

"He may have something there." I said. "The reading public isn't what it used to be."

"Yeah, so I hear. *Television* and...what do you call 'em? *Electro* games?"

"*Electronic* games, video games."

"Yeah, them. Video games. Turning pages makes 'em work up too much of a sweat."

"Not all of us."

"You don't count, Chuck, you're a queer duck and you know it, but I want to take another stab at it. I have seen some of the new films. I know that Landoma can be done now so it wouldn't be embarrassing."

"So you want a screenplay?"

"I want the book first. We have another guy who will write the adaptation once the book is done and in the stores."

"Another guy?"

"Yeah, he seems perfect, another 'Chuck', or does this one call himself Charley? Anyway, he actually wrote a screenplay *called* Adaptation, and Howie said it was pretty good so I figured he was the guy."

"Oh *him*. Doesn't seem like his kind of thing, but you never know." I paused. "So, can I come over?" I suprised myself with how eager I was to risk my life by stepping into another dimension.

"If you want.", Said ERB, "But you can't take anything with you. Nothing that isn't alive can make the transition, you'll arrive baby naked. Not even the fillings in your teeth will come through."

I was willing to get naked if that's what it took, even give up my dental

work, but I also had an artificial heart valve. If I stepped through that door and it were to vanish, I would be dead in seconds. Good thing I asked questions first. "I'd better not." No one present seemed too concerned with details, so I assume that my making the trip to Landoma was not essential to the deal.

Burton-Lynch said, "I have a copy of the manuscript for you as a WORD file. You are to show it to no one. You are to work directly on the disk and not copy it to your hard drive. If you need a copy in a different format, ask me. Do not copy the file." He handed me a zip disk that I pocketed.

ERB said, "Look it over and see what you can do. We'll expect you back in a month with a progress report." with that he bid me goodbye and the door suddenly became a solid expanse of cinderblock wall.

Burton-Lynch wrote me a check for about half of what the city of Chicago pays me in a year and walked me to the limo. "We're counting on you, Mr. Reston. This could be a big day for ERBAP!"

Chapter

3

I resisted the impulse to put the disk right into my laptop on the plane. I wanted to be in my own apartment before I even attempted to digest the experience I had just been through. I enjoyed the fluffy romantic comedy that was the in flight movie and tried not to think about it.

I read the book when I got home and was totally knocked out by it! It was completely different from *James Cooper of Landoma*. It was clear that the present work was intended to replace *James Cooper* in the chronology. I had best not relate *any* of the plot. I'm walking on thin enough ice telling this story at all even though I have changed virtually *every* name and *every* particular in the telling. In spite of that, I'm sure that the astute (or even dull-witted) reader can tell to which writer and what tales I refer in these pages.

The fact is that both ERB and his grandson badly misjudged my personality. I can't keep my mouth shut about anything. I got drunk and told the story at a party about meeting the dead author in another world and started talking about the unpublished book. Everyone thought it was an entertaining story, but no one seemed to believe it, why would they? I wouldn't if someone told it to me.

Within a week, I had another letter from Howard Burton-Lynch. I don't know where he gets his information, but what was called an urban legend was circulating on the ERB fan network that told the story of our meeting pretty much verbatim with some embellishment that varied from telling to telling. My name wasn't mentioned in most of them and that at least is a

small blessing. It did not bode well that the first line of the letter was, "Have you gone insane?"

They were going to sue me, but the fact that I had no money combined with their desire not to have the real story made public record deterred them. They demanded repayment of the advance, which I will have to do in small installments because I immediately spent it on a fancy new computer, Plasma screen TV and thirty year old single malt scotch. I was told in no uncertain terms that if I ever wrote anything that used their copy written characters or characters that resembled them, they would land on me with both feet. So basically, I had blown what would have been an easy gig that would have put me on the map forever.

A month passed. I read on the Internet that plans for the Landoma film had been indefinitely shelved, presumably because the director had backed out, but of course I knew different. I still had the WORD file, but I didn't dare do anything with it. I printed out a copy to put on my ERB bookshelf, but I hid it behind other books so visitors wouldn't see it.

Yesterday, a wall of my living room suddenly disappeared and the space it once occupied was outlined with a neon glow. ERB sat in the same room I had seen before. "You really SNAFUed this one, buddy boy."

"I feel like shit about it, if that matters to you."

"There you go again! Seriously, do you kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"Sorry. Why are you here?"

"I wanted to tell you not to worry. I told Howie to stop bothering you about the money and about the copyright."

"Why would you do that?"

"Even though I'm still alive, I'm not in your world. People on Earth shouldn't live forever. I made a big mistake thinking that I could bring out a new book at this point."

"It's a good one. One of your best."

"Nonetheless, if I were wiser, I would have realized that when I decided to live here, I gave up my life there. I am an official historian on Landoma, not a writer of pulp fiction on Earth. Not anymore."

"I don't see why you can't be both, but that's for you to decide. Is there anything I can do?"

"Take that thing that Howie gave you, that memory widget..."

"Zip disk."

"Yeah, *zip disk*. Get it and toss it to me." I went and found it and gently lobbed it in his direction. He made no move to try and catch it. When it struck the divide between Earth and Landoma, it exploded into a cascade of

sparks. "It can't come through, but it is completely destroyed. As long as that story doesn't exist, we are square."

I tried hard not to glance over toward the bookshelf. "Sounds good to me." I said. Without any visible transition, my wall was restored as it had been. Perhaps when I'm gone, some relative will be going through my effects and find my printout of the last volume of the Landoma series. No doubt, if they even bother to think about it at all, they will assume that I wrote it myself as a pastiche and it may end up in a garage sale or a pile of books going to Goodwill. I tell myself that I have learned my lesson and that I will never attempt to publish it, but I also can't bring myself to throw it away. So there it sits until fate decides its destiny.

I now live with the knowledge that Landoma is real and that my idol, Edmund Raynes Burton lives on there alongside James Cooper and the incomparable Layna Canthis. In the meanwhile, I have my own fantasies to write about and I am free to do so since I can no longer play in ERB's worlds. Perhaps the name of Chuck Reston, no...*Charles Arlen Reston* will become well known for his own creations.

The End

It took a long time to get this into a form that was readable. Trying to write from the point of view of someone who is mentally disordered has its perils. I started to expand this to a novel, but found myself starting to think too much like the protagonist and permanently shelved the project.

What *YOU* need to know about the Kuboshes

The waitress came by my table and refilled my coffee just after I emptied it for the third time in the last thirty minutes.

“It’s scary, isn’t it? Like I can read your mind.” She quipped.

I wondered how scared she would be if she really could read my mind.

I put aside the random thought. I needed to focus. Things were happening, the whole world felt tense. I was shielded from the transmissions, but I knew I would be deluding myself were I to believe that was a permanent solution. Sooner or later they tumble to the fact that they are no longer getting through and then they move as quickly as possible.

I paid the check and thanked the waitress and tipped her exactly ten percent so as not to draw attention with either niggardliness or extravagance. I did, however, risk leaving a pamphlet with it. I liked that waitress. Her name was Deedee. I wanted her to be informed about the coming great changes.

In my apartment, I carefully replaced the lining in my hat. The aluminum foil had become worn and would soon start to admit the probe rays if I failed to take action. Once, not too long ago, a hole that I allowed to go unrepaired had allowed a probe to get through and lead me into a spate of obsessive masturbation that lasted for a week. Since that time, I have been more vigilant.

I noticed that one of the boxes of pamphlets in the corner wasn’t properly lined up with the others and hoped that it hadn’t been that way for too long. The probes can sense the disturbance in the resonance field. I corrected the error and hoped for the best.

This man who had been elected president was a papist. What could this mean but ruin? A sign of the end times! How could a man who was aware think otherwise? Since he had taken control of the government, and even more so since the new pope had come to power, the beams had become stronger, the heralds in the sky had appeared more frequently and my

harassment by the police had become more obvious. The strange thing was that he himself seemed to be unaware of the conspiracy, perhaps because he represented a counter conspiracy. His predecessor knew some of it.

“Military/Industrial complex”. Ha! It was far, far broader than that.

It was almost ten o’clock, which was when I was supposed to meet with my Controller. He walked and in the park at that time every day and we had a few minutes to converse.

The clouds of doom were only metaphoric on this bright and sunny morning. I was the only one in the park with a coat. It made me stand out, but a trench coat could conceal more shielding than a light jacket.

I spotted him immediately along with his keeper, a pleasant tempered woman in early middle age, who had, for some reason, never married. The Controller turned his golden eyes on me as she unhooked his collar, but bolted off in another direction. He could learn more from sniffing a tree stump than I could from reading the entire newspaper.

I approached and waved at the woman, her name was Elizabeth Martin, and said “Nice morning!”

“Isn’t it though? How are you Mister Case?” She called over to my controller as he was starting to dig at the base of a tree. “Moosie! Your friend is here!”

His ears pricked up and he bounded toward me. He nearly bowled me over as he put his paws up on me and slobbered all over my hand. While it was abhorrent to me, I tolerated the physical contact because it was part of his cover. “We must talk,” he muttered while still licking my hand.

I had psychically encoded my report and needed to pass it to him. I knelt down so we were face to face and pulled it from my pocket. “Moosie, I have a present for you!” I held up the pink rubber Spaldeen and then tossed it fifty feet. He dashed after it and picked up the information without effort.

“You and Moosie have such a rapport.” Said Elizabeth. “Do you and your *wife* have dogs?” She gazed at me archly; she had subtly accented the word *wife* rather than the word dogs. I thought it best to keep my response neutral.

“I can’t have pets where I live.” I forced a sad smile.

“Your landlord won’t let you keep one, or maybe your *wife* is allergic?” Again the accent on *wife*. Was this some sort of code?

The Controller was starting to roll around on a squirrel corpse. Elizabeth saw and clapped her hands together loudly. “Moosie! Stop that!”

I knew it was my cue to move. “I’ll go get him Miss Martin.”

“Thank you so much. I simply can’t have him bringing that smell into the house!” She met my eyes. “And please, call me Elizabeth.”

I dashed after my contact and grabbed his collar pulling him away from the dead rodent. He looked me in the eye. "It's about time." He said. "I wish that I could do something less disgusting to get you alone to talk!"

"I'm sorry," I said, "Elizabeth was asking personal questions,... I was distracted."

"She is a slut, she wants to suck your energy so you can't perform the mission. You must maintain your celibacy!"

"I know, I know."

"Continue to evade her probing about your personal life. You have no personal life. Your life is the mission."

"I understand."

"Alright then. Today you need to meet with six people. Any six people, but they should be as divergent as possible. Talk to them about Russia, Cuba, Baseball, Mrs. Kennedy's hats, whatever, but find out their favorite color! I need to know the key wavelengths for more people so I can arrive at an average."

"Favorite colors, o.k."

"You'd better go now. You have a lot to do."

I led my controller back to his keeper and bid them both goodbye.

As I walked away, Elizabeth called after me. "Give my best to *Mrs.* Case."

I almost faltered in my pace. Did she know my mother? Had I ever asked Deedee her favorite color? I needed another cup of coffee. My controller had repeatedly told me that I should have as much of the stimulant beverage as possible. It keeps me sharp for the battle. I didn't need to ask Elizabeth. The Controller lived with her after all, he would know already.

I knew what people thought who casually observed the workings of my life, even the small parts that I allow the public to see, to them I appear to be insane. It tortures me for people to see me that way, but I must do these things in order to accomplish the great work. Sometimes "Moosie" called upon me to inform the public about some aspect of our work. Those times were the worst. I don't like the way people look at me when I talk about what's really going on. Most of them are dupes; hapless pawns of a conspiracy so great that even those of us who are aware of it can barely fathom its intricacies. Even worse is being told to "move along" by police officers, as if I was a common criminal. Mocking me with their eyes. They want me dead, but they can't just kill me straight out. Not now, not yet, but time is coming that they will be able to execute me for thinking the wrong thoughts. Can't they see I'm trying to *save their lives*?

From what my controller told me, I fashioned a master chart that delineates all of the connections for my own reference. It takes up an entire wall of my apartment and has many amendments tacked up on it on small pieces of paper. I keep promising myself I'll redo the entire thing on a single large sheet, but the situation and the relationships are fluid, ever changing. Those who are duped by the shadow reality created by the conspiracy find it impossible to believe that our rulers, our *owners*, would go through so much trouble to fool them. If they only knew exactly how and why they were being duped, they would whistle a different tune, that's for sure!

It turned out that Deedee liked pink. I admit surprise. People who favor pastels usually seem less honest and straightforward than her. I would have expected her to be a more committed red or blue type. Pink is the same color as the Spaldeens that I used to carry information to the controller. I would have to make special note of that on the chart.

I realized that I had no favorite color. I would have to ask the controller what that meant. I wondered if maybe all agents had no favorite color, that all frequencies of light effected their emotions equally.

"Puff the Magic Dragon" was playing on the radio in the Woolworth's diner. It had been preceded by "The Monster Mash", last year's hit, but Halloween was coming up in a week and it was appropriate to the season. Dragons and monsters. If only they knew. If only they knew.

My life was actually far better than it had been before my controller discovered me. I didn't know that the feelings and intuitions that I had related to something greater than myself. There was some comfort in knowing that there actually was a conspiracy to control my mind and that I was actually hearing strange instructions being beamed into my consciousness by the agents of darkness. I am *not* insane.

It was a wonderful day when Elizabeth Martin first spoke to me. The rays had been doing their evil work. I had been thinking the most unclean thoughts...thinking them with the most unclean words. She said I looked troubled. Not knowing who she was, I was understandably reluctant to tell her that strange voices were telling me to fornicate with almost anything and that Jesus would love me for it, so I just told her I had had a bad day at work. It was a lie. A sinful lie. I had been living off of a small inheritance for a few years.

She asked me my name. I said, "Joseph Case", but even then, my own name sounded like an alien construct to me. I had not yet learned my true name.

She asked me to watch her dog for a moment while she went to make a phone call. As soon as she was out of sight, the animal spoke to me.

The dog turned huge, intense brown eyes upon me. “I have been looking for you.” He said, matter-of-factly.

I was alarmed and at first pretended not to hear him. I stood rigidly gripping his lead in my white-knuckled hand.

“Don’t ignore me. I’m here to save your life.”

Those were the words! I knew that those would be the words spoken by the one who would explain everything! I was ecstatic!

In the few moments we had that first meeting, he laid out the bare bones of what it was I had been experiencing and how I could be instrumental in defeating the dark design that they were a signal of. He told me that we must meet often and he would instruct me in my part of the plan for the world’s salvation. I would work alone and would never meet another agent except him until the plan was completed. At that time all the agents would become the new philosopher kings and help Jesus return to Earth!

Just before Elizabeth returned, he told me how to block the rays and gave me my first assignment. When she sat down, she asked me if I came to the park often.

“All the time.” I said.

She beamed. That’s so nice! Moosie likes you, I do hope we will see you often.”

The controller told me to line my apartment walls with aluminum foil to block the rays. A lining of it in my hat would be required when I left the house. I must keep myself scrupulously clean and all products of my body had to be carefully disposed of. No parings of my skin or nails could be put out with the garbage. They must be burned and the ashes flushed down the toilet. My clothing could not leave the house with any stains of sweat, saliva, mucus, urine, feces or ejaculate, therefore I had to pre-wash all of my things before I went to the laundry. I must avoid physical contact with others, particularly women and I must not have intercourse. It was imperative that I keep all of my vital fluids in check.

The force that was our enemy was known as the “Goromes”. They were monsters from a malevolent dimension who have been rampaging through our universe for millions of years. They reached our planet some thousands of years ago and have been responsible for all the misery that has marked human history. The Kuboshes, who were agents of the Goromes worked hard to distract humanity with sexual impulses. They reached across space-time to affect sensitive tissues with heat and moisture and swelling until all the victim felt was need for release and the powers of the world meant nothing. They defiled our very bodies to advance their evil program. I knew that castration would protect me, but the controller forbade it and forced me

to get by with an aluminum foil shield in my under shorts. I complained of the discomfort to The Controller. His opinion was that removing my genitals would cause quite a bit more discomfort than that. Furthermore, it was a good discipline to maintain my purity against the demon Kuboshes on my own strengths.

The Goromes needed the sex energy of mankind so they could bring the Tumblebugs to Earth. Tumblebugs were psychic war machines that came in the guise of conglomerate corporations. Their mission was to tell people to indulge in sinful sex and ignore the incursion of the Goromes. They use the stolen sex energy in their advertisements and as beamed weapons against agents like myself. The result is that most of humanity is insane, driven mad by the Tumblebugs, but I have become aware. I am now, for the first time, in control of myself. I am *not* insane.

It was important for me to appear as “normal” as possible and not stand out to avoid instant termination by The Goromes. The controller insisted that that I appear as a perfect unremarkable member of society to his keeper in particular. The reason for this was unclear to me, but I complied. As far as Elizabeth Martin was concerned, I was a junior account executive with an advertising agency on Madison avenue, a job I had actually held before the sex rays got too strong. At that time in my life, although I didn’t know it, I had been a servant of the Tumblebugs.

The faces of people in the streets and on television show so little awareness. They simply go on with their happy lives without a clue as to the reality of the human condition. Charles Fort *seemed* to show remarkable insight when he said “I think we might be property.” It was not insight, but a statement of known truth, for Fort was an agent like myself. His writings are the Bible’s Third Testament.

I stopped to purchase newspapers at a stand near the park. I grabbed a Daily News, a New York Times and a Herald Tribune as well as a racing form and a copy of Popular Mechanics. The newsie was an Italian man with shifty eyes and a pencil line moustache. He was eyeing a cop who had picked up a Daily News and flipped straight to the comics page but had yet to make any indication of intent to pay for it known. As he was chuckling over the antics of Little Orphan Annie, I reached into my pocket for a dollar to pay for my reading matter. In rapid succession I fumbled the papers and then dropped some change. I drew the attention of the officer when he caught a glimpse of the foil lining of my trench coat. As I bent to pick up my papers and change, the cop asked, “Does that keep you warmer, Mack?”

I attempted to remain composed. “Why, yes. Yes it does! You should try it.”

The cop gave me a strange look. Did he suspect more? He gave a short laugh. “Ha! You bust me up! I don’t know how well the silver would go with the blue.”

“So you like blue?”

He held the inquiring expression. “You think the uniform of the New York City police department is funny? This blue is my favorite color!”

That was two down, four to go. “Of course not, officer. You have a nice day!” I paid the newsie, received thirty cents change and hurried away.

I needed to get to my apartment before noon so that I could receive the message of the title. This was one of the many ways Kuboshes communicated with one another. WPIX was running “One in a Million” and an episode of “The Phantom Empire”. The meaning of the serial title was laughably transparent, but the reference in the title of the light ice skating musical was less obvious and would require study. I would have to consult the *metrics*. I switched off the television. All I needed was the titles of the films. I wouldn’t need to consult it again until the afternoon.

I returned to the street and started counting New Jersey license plates as I walked five blocks north. The number of them on that walk at that time of day provides one of the twelve metrics used by the Kuboshes. Today there were six. When I had all twelve, I could set up the graph.

Then suddenly there was the image of Khrushchev standing on a hill of corpses making an obscene gesture at me as a convoy of flying saucers streamed overhead. Nazi storm troopers with vampire fangs pointed machine guns at me while giggling like little girls! A dog defecated on the Declaration of independence and a legion of boys pointed and laughed at the dog and at my horror. An atomic mushroom sprouted over the island of Manhattan in the form of a laughing devil face! Khrushchev pounded the Earth with the heel of his shoe while sporting a gap-toothed grin.

I reeled from the vision! Tottered like drunken sailor right there on the street. The vision passed as quickly as it had come.

A middle aged man put his hand on my shoulder. “Are you alright, buddy?”, he asked.

His touch was electric and terrifying. If any of the Gorome poison that I had worked so hard to rid myself of should seep into my clothing it would set me back several weeks worth of ablutions. “Don’t touch me!”, I screamed. “Don’t transfer your devil juice! Don’t open me to the sex vibrations!”

The man stepped back looking confused. In my alarm, my hat had come off and the sex rays were suddenly streaming into my brain. I grabbed it off the sidewalk as quickly as I could and jammed it onto my head.

The man said, "Sorry pal, I was only trying to help!"

I was distraught. "You bastard, you damned bastard!" I was on the verge of tears.

Hey, buddy, you're in public, there's ladies present! Watch your language!"

"Ladies! Energy sluts! They want my power! Fuckfuckfuckfuck fuckity-fuck! That's all they want and I am left like Sampson, shorn and blind!"

A younger man jumped forward and grabbed the collar of my coat. "You better shut up you crazy son-of-a-bitch!" He had hair in a pompadour, a lot of pimples and was chewing on a toothpick. "You take the crazy shit somewhere else, get it?"

He released my collar and I hurried off before a cop decided to show up. "I am *not* insane!", I muttered under my breath. The visions didn't come to me often when I was in public. I mostly had them at home. The visions could be triggered by all sorts of things, but thoughts about sex or the government or my mother were most likely to bring one. I think the Kuboshes were attempting to interfere with my collecting the metrics.

I turned and looked down the block and closed and opened my eyes slowly while reciting the Lord's prayer. On the fourth opening (on the line "on Earth as it is in Heaven") I counted the red and green lights out to the horizon. Three red, the second metric. There were six cabs waiting at the stand on the corner, the third metric. The clock at the automat was two minutes slow compared to my watch, the fourth metric. Pies at the automat on 42nd's windows were lined up blueberry, blueberry, apple, custard, the fifth metric. I had a piece of the apple while I observed women's hats. Pillboxes proliferated, but I was looking for floral motifs. I counted four out of ten, the sixth metric.

I know the metrics sound like they are random. Let me point out that they can be gathered from a great number of different sources. The invaders have remodulated the laws of chance by their presence placing odds for certain occurrences higher or lower than would normally be expected. Only certain types of human minds can be trained to perceive these fluxuations. My controller has such a mind.

As I left the automat I passed a pretty young woman who wore a lavender silk scarf. I took a chance.

"lovely scarf." I commented.

"It's my favorite color!" She chirped merrily. So noted.

I work with a couple of young goofballs. I would like to be able to say that these guys remind me of myself when I was young, but I was never like them. One of them is an aspiring writer, the other a budding film maker. At their age, I had no ambition whatsoever. One of their idiotic, random conversations that I overheard inspired this story.

Where God Cannot See

In Ukraine there is a city that has no name. A Germanic king on the run from the Romans founded the place, but quickly moved on without naming it. The local chieftain who inherited it declared that it should remain forever nameless in commemoration of his predecessor's oversight. On Soviet era maps it is labeled simply as "Gorod", city. Even that title was again dropped after Ukrainian independence.

It is not a large city. It produces no product in demand throughout the world or any product that bears any distinction greater than that of solid serviceability. No great men of art, politics, science or industry have made their homes there or claim it as their birthplace. It has never harbored a patron saint nor is it distinguished by any notable annual fair or festival. There are no eccentricities of local custom, costume or cuisine, nor a particular local jargon or accent to set it apart in any way. There is no grand monument in the town square for others to make mention of. No great battles were fought near this place. No famous man is buried here. The soul distinction of this place is its outstanding lack of remarkable features.

In spite of the city's prosaic nature, it draws a small but steady trade in tourism. The tourists do not come in groups mostly. They are individuals. From all over the world they come and most bear the unmistakable air of a person of power or wealth or even fame. Even so, these persons of obvious distinction come unaccompanied free of entourage, retainers, toadies or sycophants. The mission they have in this town is one that must be performed alone.

What draws the powerful to this otherwise unremarkable place is a tavern that stands on the corner of two narrow streets. The sign outside reads "Peet" which simply means "drinks". It is small seating only about twenty patrons at a time and offers no entertainments aside from a jukebox that is infrequently updated and a virtually unused crokinole board. The place serves locally made vodka and a very small selection of beer and wine. Boiled potatoes may be had for sixty kopyyka. Tuesday and Thursday, bread and dry sausage is offered. The barkeep is attentive, but unfriendly always

being quick to refill drinks but engaging in no banter or small talk. It is the place where this pub is located that makes it attractive to its patrons.

The city is so arranged that the streets form a guarding sigil. The chief planner of the town's original layout was an alchemist educated in such matters who sought a special position for his laboratory. The sigil is sovereign against the prying omniscient eye. The tavern stands at the center of that sigil. This establishment is the one place on Earth where a person may go and be out of the sight of the deity. It is the place where God cannot see you.

The laboratory came and went within a single generation, but the distant ancestor of the man named Lev, the barkeep who currently owns the place bought the property recognizing its unique value. There are some transactions, some negotiations that men may choose to engage in that will endanger a man's salvation. No, let us not say *endanger*, for there are some proposals dark and horrific enough that mere discussion of them will most certainly damn a man's soul to eternal torment, or at least would should they take place before the eye of the almighty. That is the questionable attraction of this out-of-the-way little pub.

There was a day that a man came to this place. I was not told the exact date. He did not seem typical of the pub's patrons. He was not a world leader, certainly didn't appear to be rich. There were quite few people on the Earth who would have recognized his face. The observer would have noticed that he was of the Asian race although there was nothing about him to betray a precise nationality. He wore a clean but somewhat shabby blue suit that was at least ten years out of fashion and a pair of shoes that though recently polished had obviously seen much wear. He carried a cloth briefcase that contained very little, only a hermetically sealed steel vial no bigger than half a cigar tube. It is possible, you might think, that he could be some minor functionary to a man of greater stature, but it would be untrue. Despite appearances, in the hands of this inscrutable person rests the fate of the human race.

The content of the vial was not a weapon. To call it such would cheapen it. The content was nothing less than the answer to the challenge posed by the existence of the universe, the response to matter. The crystalline structure within, if removed from its special container shielded by magnetic field and vacuum would in a rapid domino effect change all matter, all things both exalted and mundane, into something else, something that could support neither time nor form nor life.

The man walked past the front door three times before he realized it was the right place and entered. “*Chto?*” inquired the barkeep in a tone both disinterested and surly.

The Asian stretched his eyes wide attempting to adjust to the gloom inside the bar. In a precise RP accent he asked, “Do you speak English? *Français puet-être?*”

The publican rolled his eyes. “What do you want to drink?” His English was heavily accented, but correct.

“Tea, if you please.”

“I have no *tea*.”

“Oh. Whatever you recommend, then.” He scanned the pub. It was almost empty. An insipid pop song issued from the jukebox. For reasons unknown even to himself, he recognized it as *Car Song* by Ani Lorak. At a corner table sat his contact. He had carefully avoided harboring any expectations about the personage he was to meet that day and yet somehow he was still not what he had expected. He was a man who appeared to be in fit middle age. White. If he had been forced to guess his nationality he would have been tempted to say Canadian. Actually, the visitor knew that he hailed from somewhere far more exotic. His suit looked expensive, but not flashy. He wore no watch or jewelry.

The newcomer approached the table and asked, “Are you the, um, contact?”

The man looked up without altering the position of his head. His eyes were ice blue, almost white with just the smallest hint of color. “I am.”

“Excellent! My name is...”

The man cut him off. “Your name is unimportant in this context and if I don’t know it, *HE* cannot learn it from me.” On the use of the word “He”, the man cast his eye upward. “We must not even think about the entirety of the plan outside of this place and no single one of us may even know all parts of it.”

“Of course.” said the visitor as he pulled up a chair and sat. The barkeep walked over and placed a glass of vodka in front of him.

“Please allow me to take care of that.” said the white-eyed man. He handed the barkeep a large denomination Ukrainian banknote. “And please get me another also.” He sat back in his chair with an attitude of easy confidence.

The newcomer was appalled by the man’s conspicuous ease. “You do understand what we are planning?”

“I thought this is what you wanted.”

“It is. The world is ruled by half breeds and mongrels. They are horrid in every way and destroy all that is right. Those with the genetic right to be their lords are reduced to being their servants. The purity of mankind has been lost forever, never to return. Even so...the magnitude...”

“You see it as the end of a world when it is really just the end of a game. *He* and the Adversary no doubt have grown tired of it anyway and I’m sure are yearning to start fresh. Perhaps even the Adversary can be convinced to step aside and allow another to play a round.”

“You? You would become the founder of all evil in a new world?”

“Don’t be so dramatic! A new opponent! You forget that it is only a game and you shall be there to help.”

“And you are certain that this is in your power?”

“If you supply me with the means to prematurely conclude the game.”

With a shaky hand, the Asian reached into his breast pocket and placed the steel vial on the table between them.

The white-eyed man picked it up without hesitation. “I’m sure that it must be hard to believe that this is the piece that will end the game.”

“End the world, you mean. The Strangeness Matrix was formed by accident in the collider. Had I not carefully maintained the field it would have gotten out then and there. In that moment, I saved the universe, but I also gave myself the means to tear it down.” His voice quavered ever so slightly.

“You sound so bloody pious all of a sudden! Second thoughts?” The white-eyed man allowed himself a short raucous laugh. “Why then did you not destroy this thing, this power to undo the world?”

“Those of the true blood have been deposed and diluted. The world is as good as dead to me already.”

“Then it really shouldn’t be a problem for you.” He picked up the vial, tossed it and caught it while the Asian let out a small gasp. “But...” he said.

The interjection hung in the air like the fading reverberation of a gong.

“But what?”

“But perhaps you might wish to, um, do the honors?” He moved to hand him back the vial.

The nameless visitor picked up the glass of vodka that he had ignored until now and gulped down half of it. He was unused to hard liquor and coughed mightily. He stood from the table shakily and then looked the man in his icy eyes. “It *would* be an honor, would it not?”

“One such as I would consider it so.”

The man in the cheap suit remained standing. He finished off his vodka, the last sip of it perhaps that any man would take. He coughed only slightly

this time as the clear fluid burned its way down his throat. He regarded the vial in his hand. Just twist the top off and the deed would be done. It would be so very easy. All of the mongrel races would disappear. All of those of diluted blood. Up until this time he was without a mortal sin. Unleashing this force in the sight of God... he could barely imagine the punishment for destroying the entirety of His creation! In this place, he could not see that he had done it. He would be spared the torment. It must have only been a couple of seconds during which he decided both for and against at least a dozen times. The realization came that having finally taken seriously the idea that he could do it, in that realization the sin had already been committed. Finally he gave a great shriek. It reflected all his pain, all his disappointment with the world, all his impotence. He twisted the top of the vial and heard the vacuum pop. This would be the end of everything, especially his pain.

Nothing happened.

"Hello Michael." A man stood in the doorway. He might have been the twin of the contact though his eyes were black rather than white.

The man with white eyes looked up startled.

The black-eyed man said, "Oh! Look who's here! Making some plans, are we? Destroying the world? So you want to play in my place?"

The White-eyed man was momentarily speechless. Finally he sputtered, "How did you know?"

"Only *HE* can't hear you, *I* can here you just fine and I don't like what I'm hearing, Michael. Are you so petulant over the score of the game that you would simply sweep all the pieces off the board?"

The Asian man sunk down into his seat, jittering from adrenaline, but with shattered resolve. The newcomer looked at him and smiled. "Don't worry, little man, the contents of that container are no longer potent. Rather I arranged for it to *never have been* potent." The man looked back at him blankly.

The contact frowned and said, "Alright, I see no need for theatrics."

The other turned on him. "There is need if I say there is! I cannot believe that you really thought that you could just takeover my game! I'm winning! Do you think I'll just let you step in?" He suddenly grabbed the vial and turned it over onto the table. A tiny pile of sand poured out. Not erasure of reality, plain inert white quartz sand. "You're supposed to be playing on *His* side anyway. You lose, Michael. The game continues."

The contact sighed and got up from the table. "You can't blame me for trying." He said. He looked at the man in the cheap suit sitting at the table.

He was staring intently at the pile of sand on the tabletop. “Where is the crystal? The Strangeness Matrix?”

“Get this fellow another vodka.” The white-eyed man called to the barkeep.

“So, shall we go?” inquired the darker brother.

“Yes. *He*’ll be missing me.”

As they spoke, the Asian man got up and started to walk toward the door. “Wait!” said the contact. “There is something you need to know.”

The dejected little man turned. “What?” He asked hotly, “What else could I possibly need to know?”

The darker man put his hand on his shoulder. It seemed to have no weight at all. “There may have been no outcome, but you still committed the sin. Intent is all that is needed. If you walk out that door, you are mine forever and I am obligated to treat you as a special case. I know you *think* you know what that means, but you are wrong. It is far worse.”

The man seemed to shrink a little. Terror filled his eyes as they welled with tears. “I can still bring it all down! I can do it again!”

The dark brother shook his head and smiled ruefully. “Alas, no. The natural law that you took advantage of has been repealed. It shall never work again. Beings of my sort can make adjustments to the universe. My brother here uses that ability to disseminate harmony and further the aims of God. I and my colleagues use it to sow the seeds of chaos. *He* watches with the detached interest of a man who observes microbes only he is impossibly greater than a man and you are far, far smaller than a microbe. Of the three of us, *He* is the one who cares least of all. He neither loves nor hates. He merely evaluates and assigns consequences for action.”

The little man in the cheap suit looked as if he had lost everything. Even without his diabolical action, his world had still disappeared. The two higher beings turned to leave and the man called out to them, “Surely with your power, there is something you can do!” He looked to the white-eyed man. “I came to help you. Help me!”

The man named Michael came over to him and touched his forehead with a finger. The man’s mind ceased to record memories. From one second to the next his world was recreated fresh. He had no past or future, only a *now*. There was no memory of creating a Strangeness Matrix. There was no memory of a world gone wrong. There was no memory of education in advanced physics. There was no memory of why he was here or who these men were. “Hello.” He said with a benign smile.

The white-eyed man said to no one in particular. "He can leave here safely if he wants, but it may be quite a while before he thinks to do so. Lev, I think you have a new chore boy."

The two angels, one of high order, one fallen walked from the tavern leaving him to stand there. For several minutes he stood in place, paralyzed until he became conscious of the barkeep standing in front of him with a broom in his hand.

"You sweep, you get potato." He said.

This story exists because I misheard a phrase on the television when I was half asleep. It was on the Tonight Show and I thought I heard Jay Leno use the phrase "BooJoo, the happy bunny." I still don't know what he said, but it definitely wasn't that.

BooJoo

I have to admit, the band wasn't bad at all. I had tended to underestimate Jerry in the past because he always seemed to play his life kind of loose and goofy. The fact is that the guy has real talent. The band was called "The People's Republic of Bop", but they played in a number of jazz styles and Jerry blew cornet with them. I understand that they were actually taking in enough bread from their gigs to pay for their transportation and some beers. Tonight they were in great form and rocking the house, the house in question being a hole in the wall gallery in Cambridge. They played a 20's style dance number. Jerry and two of the other band members stepped up to a mike and proceeded to sing in their best "Rhythm Boys" style:

*It's BooJoo! The happy bunny!
He is never sad and always funny!
Whenever BooJoo comes to play,
It will be a happy day'
With BooJoo, the happy bunny*

*With BooJoo, it's always sunny
He is everybody's favorite bunny
Even on a rainy day,
BooJoo sweeps the clouds away!
He's BoooooJooooo, the happy bunny!*

The stupidity of the lyrics seemed inspired to my beer fueled imagination. What the heck was BooJoo? I made a point of asking Jerry the next day over coffee. Coffee with Jerry was a well practiced ceremony reflecting our often different schedules. It was rare that Jerry was up before ten in the morning, eleven was more usual. I see the sunrise every day, even Sundays. It doesn't matter if I'm working nights or days, but I'm pretty much done with night shifts. Coffee with Jerry was breakfast for him and early lunch for me. As he poured my second cup I mentioned the odd lyrics from the previous night.

He nodded his head. “Right, you wouldn’t know because you didn’t grow up here. You probably wouldn’t even if you had. BooJoo was a kids show that ran for just a short time in the early seventies. If I called it second rate, I’d be paying it a huge compliment. It was more like fourth or fifth rate, really crappy. I think they only made about a dozen episodes. We caught it by accident when we were channel surfing and getting stoned in my friend Ronny’s basement senior year of high school. We watched every day until it just disappeared.”

“So why were you watching a fifth rate kids show?”

“Aw, Jake, it was *so* weird! There was always a guest and the guest would do all the talking. They were really odd guests for a kid’s show though”

“Odd, huh?”

“Yeah, like most kid’s shows will have a guy from the zoo bring on animals or some kid’s book author or some shit like that, but BooJoo had like *scientists* and stuff!”

“Scientists?”

“Yeah, or military guys. I remember this Air Force Captain that played piano, old standards and ragtime!”

“What the fuck?”

“Exactly...what the fuck.”

“So what about BooJoo?”

“The bunny suit was strictly from the Bizzaro world! He was about six feet tall and pink and his ears were just bent cylinders with rounded ends. He wore these blue shorts with big buttons and suspenders. The paws were just pink spray-painted oven mitts! He sometimes would be joined by Max, who was a *really* untalented clown. He only lasted a few episodes. He would come out and try to juggle but couldn’t go more than a second or two. His biggest gags involved falling down.”

“So, the bunny, was he like Barney or something? Did he sing and dance?”

“Well, sort of. The guest would do all the talking. The only time you would hear BooJoo’s voice would be when he said his own name or sang these weird nonsense songs, didn’t have any English words, just funny sounds.”

At this point, I was getting a germ of an idea. I figured that I could write something about this show for one of the alternative weeklies for a few bucks. My career as a writer has somewhat solidified since I published my novel *The New Adventures of the Son of Zorro* on the web. A literary agent had seen it and started getting me published here and there. Mostly small magazines, but it provided some income and in my own mind, my star was rising. My latest project was a serial for an alternative weekly, the Boston

Big Idea, called *Aviators of Tomorrow*. The episodes didn't run serially though and were actually random chapters from an imagined adventure book series for boys from the nineteen twenties. It was kind of high concept and I sure wasn't making a living off of it. I still needed to keep a full time job and that was a bit of a problem for a while after I had been fired from a night job at Crandall Labs, a high tech company on route 128 for unauthorized access to their computer network and inadvertently worsening their very peculiar rodent problem. It's a *long* story. It took me a while with the help of a good lawyer (provided by the channel seven news in exchange for exclusive interviews) to get them to finally give me a decent reference. So, in spite of the setback, my life was once again on track. The reporter who interviewed me was a certain Lauren Vrabec and her coverage of my story helped get her promoted to weekend anchor at the station. Perhaps, I thought, she might feel well enough disposed toward me that she could help me out with some research. The fact is she's a pretty darned attractive gal and I was happy to have an excuse to pay her a visit.

I pumped Jerry for more info on the BooJoo show but it was hard to get the facts really straight seeing as he saw them all at least thirty years ago through the lens of being really high. I'm not judging him, hell we were *all* high back then, but still, details were scanty and variable.

It took a couple of days, but I was finally able to pin Lauren down on a time she could see me at her office. I hadn't seen her in person since the Crandall Labs business was over. I knew she was hot, but she looked so much better in person than on television. I did note that she still didn't have a ring on her finger.

Lauren showed me a computer that had air records for the past forty years. It was basically like TV Guide listings showing every show the station had broadcast and, more importantly for me, what shows had been in the same time slot on other stations. It took me a little while probing around the first few years of the seventies, but then I found it. It had aired on channel 61 which is now a lesser *Telemundo* affiliate. *BooJoo the Happy Bunny* had an exactly three pm timeslot on weekdays pretty much ensuring most kids would miss it or at best catch only the last few minutes of it because they wouldn't be home from school yet. I guessed that Jerry and his friends had seen it because they were blowing off their last class of the day.

I made a few screen shots and stored them on my jump drive, then headed for Lauren's desk. She knew someone who worked over at WMUY channel 61, a guy who had been a news writer at channel seven was now news director over there. I got on the subway and headed for the studio that was near the Forrest Hills stop on the Orange Line.

The studio was a smallish two story brick office building. Lauren had called ahead and set up an appointment for me. This news director was as nice a guy as you would ever want to meet, but he didn't know a damn thing about BooJoo. The station had changed hands twice since BooJoo had last aired. They did have a storage room full of old file cabinets, but he didn't have the time to keep an eye on me while I went through stuff. He said I could come back during the overnight shift and the night station manager would be happy to help me. I had to work the next day so I went home to take a nap.

I was back at around 11:30 pm. I stopped outside the studio to have a smoke but put it out only half done when a rat skittered by about ten feet from me. Rats give me the willies.

To me, it didn't look like the night manager had an awful lot to do. He was running a tape of *Green Acres* that was playing on several monitors. Whoever dubs Eva Gabor's voice in Spanish does a really nice job with the accent.

Small world department: it turns out that this guy, Bob Vera, had gone to high school with me in White Plains New York. He had been a year behind me, but I had actually known him a little bit. Everybody had called him "Berto" when he was a kid. Back then I had assumed he was Puerto Rican, but he was actually from a Cuban family and had been born right in White Plains. He had gone to tech school and ended up as a sound and video technician. There were textbooks all around his work station and I learned that he was working on a master's degree to become a real engineer. "Man, they have me reading up on some heavy stuff! I am mostly dealing with physics as it applies to electronics, but I had to take a general course just for background. You ever hear of something called 'String Theory'?"

"I've heard the word before, but I don't know what it's all about." I'm a bright enough guy, but I'm also a high school dropout. I have a lot to be proud of in terms of my self-education, but things like math and other disciplines that require a lot of math like physics and chemistry I have mostly ignored. I don't often admit it, but just about everything I think I know about science I learned from science fiction. As a result, a lot of what I think I know often turns out to be wrong, or at best incomplete.

"It's tricky stuff, man. They, like, think there are ten or eleven or maybe more dimensions of space, but most of them are all curled up on the quantum level! This book says that it represents the hyper-dimensional surface on which our universe resides!"

I nodded my head sagely. "Quantum level, hyper-dimensional, you don't say." I had no clue what he was talking about.

“That’s way down there...smaller than atoms.”

“Wow.”

“And the math implies the existence of alternate universes. Some of them a lot like ours, some of them so different that they have different natural laws.”

I had heard stuff like this and certainly seen the concept dealt with in SF, but I had no idea that real science types were taking this kind of thing seriously. In some inexplicable way, it almost takes the fun out of it. It’s like reality is intruding on fantasy’s turf.

Bob led me to the store room. It simultaneously was both smaller and more crowded than I had imagined it would be. Some of the file cabinets I wanted to get to had a desk thrown on top of them and a number of boxes that had been stuffed with papers and stacked on top of one another had predictably enough burst their sides and toppled over. Judging from the dust, it had happened a good twenty years ago. This was going to take some work.

I didn’t even know the sun had risen until Bob came by to tell me he was going off shift and I would have to wrap it up for the night. I had found some Beta cassettes that were just marked *transcriptions of afternoon programming-2nd quarter 1973*. Bob was more than happy to let me borrow them, in fact, he said that he doubted anyone would miss them if they were never seen again.

I was thinking it was going to be a real pain in the ass to find a Betamax machine to view these tapes on, but I lucked out. Jerry had one stashed in a closet. He had gone through a phase in the 80’s when he had been recording music on beta cassettes. It was apparently one of the earliest digital formats. He had tons of live Miles Davis on them that I was going to have to hear at some point.

Jerry said, “It’s weird, just last night I had a dream about Miles.” Jazz musicians loomed large in Jerry’s oneiric landscape.

“This ought to be good.”

“We were having breakfast together....”

“You and Miles.”

“Yeah, me and Miles. Let me finish. He was making waffles for the two of us. It was kind of weird how he made them. He just ladled pancake batter into a hot pan, not a waffle iron, but they still came out as waffles. He served them with soft butter and powdered sugar.”

“After breakfast, he put a horn in front of me and demanded that I show him my stuff. This is *Miles*, right? How could I rate? I tried to blow but the horn would only make duck calls and fart noises and all the while Miles is laughing at me louder and louder. Then I woke up.”

I really envy Jerry's dreams. Either I can't remember my dreams or they are about being at work. Then I wake up and have to go to work.

It took us a while to set up the VCR so it would work right with his TV. It didn't have a simple cable plug but had to be hooked up to the antenna terminals, but it didn't want to work until we actually unhooked the cable.

The afternoon programming was straight out of a can. The first tape picked up in the middle of a *Bowery Boys* short followed by an episode of *The Munsters* which in turn was followed by two back to back episodes of *Mr. Ed*. The commercials were all for laundry soap and TV dinners and crap like that. We fast forwarded through a couple of tapes like that stopping only to watch a *Three Stooges* short, *Three Arabian Nuts*, a Shemp, but still a funny one, but no BooJoo to be seen. It was on tape number three that BooJoo made his appearance. It was the very first episode taking up the timeslot of the first *Mr. Ed* from the previous two tapes.

The episode began with a close up of a smiling military officer whistling two clear notes and asking in a merry voice, "Can BooJoo come out to play?" There is a quick cut to the studio where we see BooJoo hopping through a patch of Astroturf with cardboard cut out flowers stuck into it here and there. The theme song, sung by a female chorus comes up as BooJoo cocks his ear and hops toward the camera. The show's logo pops up and a voiceover announces, "Today BooJoo's special playmate is Captain John Iverson!"

There is a commercial for real estate in Minnesota and then we are looking at the military guy and BooJoo standing side by side. The uniform speaks.

"Hi kids! I'm Captain John Iverson of the United States Air Force and today I'm BooJoo's special playmate! And, who, you may be wondering, is BooJoo? Well, BooJoo is just about the very happiest bunny in the meadow."

At this point BooJoo bounces on his toes and, in kind of a strange voice, says "BooJoo the Happy Bunny!"

The Captain continued. "Every day BooJoo comes out to frolic with a special playmate! We'll play games and sing songs and we'll even watch cartoons!"

BooJoo starts jumping up and down. The Captain looks inquiringly over at him and then snaps his fingers. "I think BooJoo wants to sing one of his special BooJoo songs! Hey why don't we, and Max the Clown can join us!"

Max runs out into the shot. He is in whiteface with a big red nose and a frizzy blue wig. His loose one piece outfit is covered in huge red polka dots. He goes up to BooJoo and asks, "Oh may I? I just *love* BooJoo songs!"

BooJoo claps his hands and jumps up and down. This is the first time that the audience gets a good look at the oven mitt hands. They even still have the little loops for hanging them still attached. They appear to have been spray painted pink to match the rest of BooJoo.

The music starts and all three sing and do a strange dance in which they kick and spin and hop. The lyrics seem to be pure nonsense.

*Moof, woo, woo
Wuf, wuf, wuf!
Oogah wotay joogah,
Ruf, ruf, ruf*

*Noogie, woogie, oogie pee
Oolah flambadula wee!*

*Moof, woo, moof
Wuf, wuf, wuf!
Oogah wotay joogah,
Ruf, ruf, ruf*

It was just so freakin' weird! A clown, a weird looking bunny and an Air Force officer doing this silly dance and singing this weird song. I guess I had seen similar stuff on other kids shows, but this seemed just a bit *off* somehow. This bunny really *was* weird looking too. He was almost all pink with these blue sort of Micky Mouse shorts with big buttons and suspenders. His body wasn't exactly furry. It looked sort of like it was covered in pink flocking except his face and a patch on his belly that was the same color but had a leathery sheen. From the top his feet just looked like big ovals, but you could see when he was dancing that there were three dark circular pads on their bottoms, two in the back and one in the front. His head was a domed cylinder and the two ears were narrower domed cylinders that rose from the head with a slight "s" curve. His eyes were just made from painted cardboard discs and didn't seem to be all that securely attached as they would waggle quite a bit when he moved. He had a cardboard bunny nose that had three big whiskers coming out of either side above a cardboard pair of big buck teeth and a lip curved into a silly grin.

After the dance Captain Iverson turns to Max and asks him, "So Max, do you live right here in the meadow?"

"I do, Captain John. Years ago, I was performing in a traveling circus and we stopped and set up in this beautiful meadow. After the show, I made

myself a picnic lunch and went off eat it among the grass and flowers. After lunch, I was tired and took a nap, but I must have overslept because when I woke up it was the next morning!” Max had a really pronounced Boston accent.

“My goodness! You *did* oversleep.”

“Yes and when I went back, I found that the circus had packed up and left without me!”

“How sad!”

“Oh, I *was* sad! But then I met BooJoo and we became best friends! So now I live in the meadow with BooJoo and all his playmates!”

“Hey, that’s great!”

At this point BooJoo starts pointing directly at the camera and jumping up and down excitedly. The captain says “What’s that, BooJoo? You say it’s time for a cartoon? Well, let’s all watch!” And the scene cuts to one of those weird old silent Felix the Cat cartoons where he has the detachable tail that he can use for a telescope or a golf club or whatever. Those ones are terrific when you’re baked, but, God, I found it hard to believe that any kid in the seventies would have found this stuff very entertaining. Another commercial, this one for denture adhesive and we are back in the meadow. Now there is an upright piano. Captain Iverson sits down and plays and sings *Peg o’ my Heart* while Max attempts a soft shoe. BooJoo watches and claps his oven mitt hands. If there was a kid alive in 1973 who didn’t think this sucks, I’d like to meet him. Obviously the surrealism of this show appealed much more to Jerry and his stoned friends than it ever could have to kids. This is followed by another gibberish BooJoo song and then, strangest of all Captain Iverson talks about the Air force and how the USAF is the most powerful military organization anywhere. It seemed so out of context. Then there was another equally old cartoon and BooJoo bid his friends goodbye. Roll credits.

“You were a *fan* of this shit?”

“It made sense at the time.”

“Where were the commercials for breakfast cereal and Barbie dolls? Ferchristsake, they were selling stuff for *dentures*!”

“I know. Even back in the day, I knew this was some strange stuff.”

I spent another night going through the WMUY storage room and came up with about fifteen BooJoo episodes and I was pretty sure that I now had the entire run of the series.

The string of BooJoo “playmates” on these shows were remarkable. Colonel Clifford R. Yeats, United States Army, who gave a dumbed-down lecture on artillery. He also, by the way, had a very nice singing voice. Dr.

Alan Bourne, biochemist. He spoke briefly about pollution of the air and how even trace amounts of some chemicals in the air can be quite damaging to some organisms. Dr. Dorothy Hacking, Chemical engineer, spoke about petroleum distillation. She baffled Max the clown with card tricks as well. Dr. Charles Hines, physicist. He talked about alternate universes. *Alternate fucking universes!* He followed it up with a less-than-perfect performance of “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” on the banjo. I just didn’t get it. It was like amateur night at the military/industrial complex.

From the credits I got the name of the producer, Howard D. Johns. I tried to look him up on the Internet Movie Database which very rarely fails to turn up information on almost anybody involved with movies or television. I got bupkis on Howard Johns. The only name in the credits I got a hit on was a guy named Delmar Krenwinkle III, a cameraman, and he still lived in the area.

I paid Krenwinkle a visit at another local station where he now worked as a director for cooking shows. He didn’t remember much except that he was told that the show had been shot in a studio at Hanscom Field in Bedford and that it was supposedly being made for broadcast to military families living on bases throughout the country. Johns, it turned out was *US Air Force Colonel* Howard D. Johns! The entire production was a military project. Senator Proxmire must have been pretty happy over how little money was spent on it.

I found out that Johns had died back in 1980. The director had been a Captain Michael Wright. He retired from the Air force about ten years back and got elected to congress representing the state of Delaware. I called his office in Washington and left a message that I was looking for information about the BooJoo show. The next day I received a call from his assistant saying that she had been told to inform me that that particular project was still classified. Classified? He *must* have thought that I was asking about something else. In any case all further inquiries to his office were ignored.

I started to Google some of the scientists that had appeared on the show. Some were dead, some were out of the country. The only one who was still local *and* returned my call was the banjo plucking physicist, Charles Hines. As it happened he had also been the head writer on the show and he currently taught at MIT right here in Cambridge. I found him on the net as the author of the book *Retroflective Hyperspatial Modalities and Tuned Transcontinuum Parities*. That was just the title and it might as well have been in Chinese as far as I was concerned. This guy wrote BooJoo? When I called his office I spoke to a young woman, a graduate student. I got an appointment with Hines for early the next week without her even asking

what my business with him might be.

That afternoon, I called Lauren from work to thank her again for setting me up with Channel 61 and to invite her out for a drink that evening. She was a little hesitant and I thought I was going to have to settle for coffee the next day. It was still better than I had any right to expect because I'm sure she had all kinds of guys chasing after her. She finally said yes to the drink. Persistence pays.

I showered and dressed at home trying to make myself look like the kind of guy I thought Lauren would look twice at. That was kind of a tough job seeing as I usually looked like the kind of guy she would toss a quarter to with the admonition that I spend it on food. Nonetheless, combed and cologned I met her at John Harvard's Brewhouse in Harvard Square an hour later. She came in shortly after I had found a table. She was still in her work clothes except that she had replaced her high heels with a pair of running shoes. That she had even shown up was a triumph for me.

She seemed happy enough to be there. Smiled, gave me an air-peck. Even after a full day of work she looked pretty fresh. She ordered a vodka martini, I asked for Lagovulin straight up.

"So," she said, "what have you got for me?"

What have I got? So this was strictly business. She thought I had a story for her. No matter, I could work with this. "I have been chasing down info on a really odd kids show and weirder and weirder stuff keeps turning up. I think the Air-force is involved and things might not be as they appear."

Lauren ever-so-slightly curled her lip. "I'm not going to get far with a conspiracy theory about a kids show."

"Stay with me, Lauren. I was right about the rats, wasn't I?"

She nodded her head. I had narrowly missed being thrown in jail for trespassing on a former employer who was doing animal experiments that involved networking living brains. I suspected that the rats were up to something, but no one else did. In the end, it was the rats themselves that had proven me right. "Yes, you were right about the rats. What is it *this* time?"

"There is something strange about the bunny show. I don't think it was really for kids. Maybe it was something to do with the Cold War, I'm not sure. You ought to at least see a few of the episodes." I went on to tell her about what I had found and how I had found it, but I kept the details vague. I still wanted to write my article *and* I still wanted her to need me as the contact on the story. Chances were that if I just gave her everything I had discovered including names of people involved, I would never see her again. I just wanted to keep hope alive.

We parted company with no second drink and no promise of another meeting. Just her requesting that I keep her posted if the story amounts to anything.

I went back home and had a second drink on my own and watched more BooJoo episodes. I was feeling pretty sorry for myself.

The weekend was spent mostly with my writing an overview of the show and listening to jazz records with Jerry. Jerry seemed to think I had a much better shot with Lauren than I did. "Of course she's going to be into you. She's a news woman and you're news!"

"I'm yesterday's news."

"You're good luck. The last time she interviewed you, she got promoted."

"I think that's why she agreed to get a drink with me, in case I'm onto something."

Jerry subsided a bit. "So what *are* you onto?"

I was nowhere near sorting it all out. What I had told Lauren was just a wild guess to keep her interested. "All I have is a pile of information that doesn't amount to much, but is really strange. The show was made by the military. You've seen the shows. It just seems really weird, like they're code or something. I told Lauren that they might have been meant for the Russians to see, but I really have no idea. I'm going to see the head writer on Monday if you want to come with."

"Don't you have to work Monday?"

"Screw work."

Hines' office was a little hole-in-the-wall along a corridor long enough for the Pentagon. I knocked on the door and Jerry and I were admitted to an outer office by a very attractive young woman, a total babe from top to bottom. She shook both our hands and introduced herself as Marcia Shoenberg. My years of mumbling and toe shuffling when confronted by a pretty girl are something that I left behind in high school, or so I had thought, but this auburn-haired, deep-blue-eyed beauty took me by surprise. Is this the kind of girl that goes to engineering schools these days? She seemed a lot more physically fit than the average science type, if you know what I mean. Her effect on Jerry was about the same, but she politely pretended not to notice and pointed us to a door to meet with Doctor Hines.

We found Hines behind it at a desk tapping on a computer keyboard. He stood up and we introduced ourselves. "Professor Hines, I'm Jake Zimmer, I'm a writer. You may have seen my work in some local publications under the byline Jacob M. Zimmer. This is my friend Jerry Howard."

"Please, call me Charley. A writer, you say. What are you writing about?" Hines looked to be in his mid sixties, but quite fit. He seemed like one of

those guys that got out to run ten miles every morning. He had a full head of wavy steel gray hair and a nice strong handshake. He should have been in sales or politics, the kind of person that makes you want to like him. In a corner of the office, a five stringed banjo leaned against the wall. This was the guy alright.

"I have taken an interest in a project you worked on quite some time ago, the BooJoo show." From the outer office came a gasp and a slight thump.

Charlie called out "You o.k., Marcia?"

"Just spilled some coffee, Professor Hines." Came the reply through the door.

Charlie returned his attention to me. "The BooJoo show?!? That was a long time ago."

"It was, but some people remember it fondly. I was hoping that you might be able to help me fill in some of the history of the show and your part in it."

"It did so poorly in the ratings. I thought kids hated it, we only made fifteen episodes." He seemed to be a bit uncomfortable. I thought perhaps he was embarrassed to have worked on such a piece of crap.

I don't know about kids, but certain young adults were impressed by its offbeat and surrealistic aspects." I made the universal "toke" gesture holding a tightly gripped thumb and forefinger to my lips and gave a little wink.

Charlie was hesitant but then relaxed a bit. "Right. We never really considered that demographic at the time. There isn't really too much to tell. It was early in my career and the extra income from writing was helpful. Even at big prestigious universities, assistant professors, which is what I was at the time, don't get paid a lot."

"The tone of the show was a little peculiar, military men as guests and so forth."

"Yes, that must seem strange. The show was made with kids in families living on military bases in mind. We just didn't continue with it long enough for it to be used that way. The Air force cut off funding."

"I don't suppose you have anything like production stills or scripts around."

"All that stuff is long gone. The project didn't amount to anything. No one thought that stuff was important."

I was disappointed that there wasn't more to it. It didn't seem that I could get a good article out of this. It just went nowhere. Jerry and I said goodbye to Charlie and indulged in another long look at Marcia on the way out.

There was a message on the machine from Michelle, my boss when I got home. She expressed hopes that I was feeling better and would be able to come into the office the next day. I guess that no one can write catalog copy

quite like me. I figured that I might as well go in, chasing this story was getting me nowhere.

I was having a beer and watching Leno when my doorbell rang. I liked the fact that my basement apartment had a totally private entrance, but the downside of that was that no one had to call up and be buzzed in. They can just walk up to my door. Stupidly, I didn't even look through the peephole, I just swung open the door. Standing there was a Military man with stars on his shoulders, I wasn't even sure what service, accompanied by two helmeted MPs. I don't think the military police have jurisdiction in civilian neighborhoods, but something in their general manner led me to believe that they didn't care.

The man with the stars brushed past me to enter my pad uninvited followed by the MPs. "Are you Jacob Zimmer?" Asked the uniform. He looked contemptuously around my small apartment filled with old paperbacks, even older records and decorated with various toys including an old type-case hanging on the wall with a different '60's era Cracker-Jack prize in each tiny compartment.

"Who's asking?"

"I am General John Iverson, USAF." Iverson! It was the young captain from the first BooJoo show some thirty years older!

"Why are you here?"

"Are you Jacob Zimmer?" He repeated impatiently.

"That's what it says on my driver's license."

"Rest assured, Mister Zimmer, that this is *not* an occasion that calls for levity. It has come to our attention that you have in your possession materials belonging to the United States Air Force. These items must be returned to us immediately."

I wondered how dumb I could get away with playing this. "What items do you think I have?"

Iverson said. "Feigning ignorance won't help you at all." Well, that answered that. "You know to which items we are referring and we know that you have them. The tapes please."

"Those tapes are the property of WMUY."

"They have classified content that is property of the Air Force." It just wasn't that important. I gave them the tapes. They asked if I had duplicated any of the material and warned me not to talk about the content of the tapes or their visit to my house.

I called in sick again the next day. Michelle was somewhat pissed. She just said "Ihopeyoufeelbettersoon" All as one word and slammed the phone down. A couple more of these and my employment would be history. I

wasn't so good at my job that I couldn't be easily replaced.

The next person I called was Charlie Hines. This time I got him on the phone directly rather than the lovely Marcia. I made an appointment to see him that afternoon.

I called Jerry when he was just contemplating getting out of bed and asked him to come visit Charlie. I didn't say it to him, but I thought I might need a witness. "Will Marcia be there?", he inquired archly.

To Jerry's visible disappointment, Marcia wasn't there when we arrived, but Charlie showed us both right into his office. You sounded upset on the phone, Jake. What's up?"

"I had a visitor last night, Charlie."

"A visitor?"

"General Iverson. He took my BooJoo tapes."

"Iverson!" Hines sat back looking deflated. "This could be bad. Maybe I shouldn't have talked to you about the show. I thought you'd look at them and would think it was a worthless subject and that would be the end of it."

"It would have been. The show sucks. No offense."

"None taken. That was the intent. We didn't want anyone to watch."

"Huh?"

"We needed the channel, but we didn't want a big audience. No audience at all would have been ideal, but we knew someone would watch."

"Kids."

"Yeah, kids. We assumed mostly because a parent made them. The show was nonviolent and that would be a selling point for some parents. We didn't think any kid would watch more than one episode on their own."

"This is kind of opposite of a standard marketing strategy."

"True. Getting viewers was not our concern. Even the commercials weren't the type you see in kid's programming. They were calculated to be unexciting to children."

"I don't get it."

"Look, My time and availability might be limited. Iverson knows that you have seen some of the tapes. I wonder how he found out you had them. I hate to say it, but you should make some notes, tell some people. There is no telling what might happen."

"Get serious! Over a kids show?"

"It was a front! Don't you get it?"

"A front? For what?" I just didn't see where he was going, how could I have?

Hines shook his head. "It's a long, complicated story, but it begins with my work. I might have had the Nobel prize! The Air Force suppressed me. The

greater part of my work is classified Top Secret and can't be published."

"What does this have to do with the show?"

Hines looked at me hard. I think he wanted to get an idea of my character before he went on. "In 1972, I was a civilian employee of the Air Force. My graduate studies had been in vibrational physics some of which had been directed at making objects x-ray or RADAR transparent or even invisible. The Air Force hired me and classified the work, but I was given a large staff and a well-equipped lab in which I was expected to work out practical applications. At the time, it seemed like the perfect deal. One of the systems my lab came up with had an unexpected result. An attempt to rotate the atoms of a steel sphere to make it transparent opened an aperture to Moof."

"Moof?" I recognized the odd name as one of the nonsense words from the BooJoo songs.

"Moof is a planet that exists in an alternate universe, a spacetime continuum parallel to our own. It actually is Earth, but our timelines divided before the cosmic collision that caused the formation of the Moon. For Moof, that event never occurred."

"Alternate universe? Like in 'string theory'?"

Charlie lit up a little. "Yes! Like in string theory! Moof is somewhat larger than Earth with a higher gravity, denser atmosphere, deeper oceans and different geology. It is the home of the Bujus."

"Like BooJoo the bunny? Charlie, this all sounds pretty nuts."

"Hear me out. The Bujus are nothing like 'bunnies' and certainly nothing like humans. They have distinct differences in the structure of their DNA and proteins. Unlike Earth, the inhabitants of this world are not divided into living kingdoms of plants and animals. There are indeed life forms that spend their entire lives rooted to one spot living on solar energy and soil minerals and there are many that spend the majority of their lives free roaming. All land life forms spend at least some part of their existence rooted in the soil although for many it is only in their larval stage."

I couldn't believe I was actually hearing this stuff.

"A team stepped over onto the surface of Moof. In space suits mostly to protect from possible infection from Moofian microbes and for temperature control because Moof is considerably warmer than Earth. That is when we met the bujus."

"Pink bunnies?"

Charley curled his lip. "As I said, the bujus are *not* bunnies. Let me show you something." He pulled a three ring binder off a shelf and opened it showing me a photograph. It was taken in a strange landscape of low mounds and pools of water. The mounds were covered in what seemed to be

vegetation all in shades of red, yellow and orange with only occasional patches of green and brown. In the center of the photo was something that was hard for my brain to put together. It was mostly pink and stood on two legs with a bent over torso. Between the legs was a mass of tentacles and a large spongy ovoid mass. The upper body had two branches that ended in beak-like structures surrounded by more tentacles. Between the two branches was a hump with two more branches growing from it. These smaller branches had no beaks or tentacles. On the hump was a tightly puckered orifice that brought up obvious connotations in the human mind. "That is a buju. The bujus live in the meadows, which are hummocked lowlands where they raise their young like a farmer raises a crop. The continents of Moof are dotted with these areas that are the buju analog of nations."

"Wait....so is BooJoo a buju?"

"He was."

I sat there sputtering for a few seconds before I was able to formulate another sensible question. "Why?"

"The bujus are warlike and industrially advanced. They figured out where we came from and applied themselves to figuring out how to get here. The bujus do not have personal names. They refer to themselves as 'this buju', *bujutha* in their language. Their friendly greeting for one another is 'this buju makes no war', *bujutha hapibuni*. Within individual meadows, the bujus live at peace, but they are vehemently racist toward the denizens of other meadows. A meadow is by definition at war with all other meadows. The most common buju threat is 'We will dance in your meadows' which is meant to imply that they will stomp on the rooted young of their enemy and take possession of the lands for their own use. The bujus of the meadow we visited decided that they wanted to dance in our meadows."

"This is so weird! How does this lead to a crappy kids show?"

"I'm getting there. Since the bujus considered themselves to be at war with us, we had no issue with capturing a few bujus and taking them back to Earth for interrogation. We learned the buju language and a general outline of buju culture and history and buju anatomy. You have no idea what we might have been facing if the bujus were to invade Earth. They have almost no localized vital organs. A single bullet cannot kill or even slow down a buju. A machine gun can cut one down, but blowing pieces off of them is dangerous as the broken off pieces of flesh can take root and grow into new bujus. We are militarily more advanced than they are and would ultimately prevail, but the damage would be incalculable."

"Invaders from another dimension?" Even if this man was a screwball, I

had a fantastic story here. The only problem was the visit from Iverson which made it seem a bit plausible. “Why did you tell Iverson I had those tapes?”

“I didn’t. I have no idea how he found out.”

That was the moment the office door swung open. Jerry’s face sprouted a dazzling smile. “Hi Marcia!”, He said.

“Shut the fuck up.”, She replied as she closed the door behind her. She looked over at Hines. “You really had no idea? That doesn’t give much credit to all those people who call you a genius.”

“Marcia, I’m in a meeting here...”, Started Charlie.

Marcia cut him off. “I don’t work for *you*, I’m with Air Force Intelligence. I’m *Captain* Marcia Schoenberg, and I have been assigned to you for the last nine months. Ever since the project ended, *someone* you work closely with has been keeping an eye on you. General Iverson had your personality pretty well figured out. He assumed that you would blab the whole thing sooner or later.”

“So, you’re the one who told the Air Force?” I asked lamely.

“I *am* the Air Force. Try to keep up.”

“I knew she didn’t look like an engineer.”, I muttered under my breath.

Marcia tossed her perfect locks and said, “You all need to come with me.” To ensure that there was no disagreement, she produced an automatic pistol from behind her back. “Let’s go to your car, Charlie.”

Still stunned by the unexpected turn of events, we were all pretty easy to march down to the lot and into the car. She put Charlie behind the wheel and set me riding shotgun. Jerry was behind Hines and Marcia was behind me keeping the gun on all of us. “You know the way, Charlie. Drive.”

It was a quick shot down Massachusetts Avenue into Roxbury in the industrial district just beyond the hospital. There is an ice warehouse down there that I used to see from a distance everyday when I worked in Boston years ago. At least it said it was an ice warehouse on the outside and I had always believed it.

Marcia inserted a card key into a slot by a painted metal door and it opened into a space where a single uniformed man sat at a desk before a much larger and higher tech looking door. When he saw Marcia, he stood up and saluted. “At ease, lieutenant, I need to see the general right away.”

“Yes Ma’am.” He pressed a button on the desk and the huge metal door slid silently aside.

Marcia gestured to us with the automatic and we went through ahead of her. We were in a football field sized room full of office cubicles and each cubicle contained a busily working man or woman, most in uniform. To the

sides of the packed office floor were glass walled offices and meeting rooms. Over far away in the direction that Marcia had us headed, one of the rooms contained something really weird. Jerry was the first to spot them. “Bujus!” He pointed a quivering finger.

In the glass enclosure were a half dozen bujus milling around. Seeing one alive was a very different experience from seeing the photo, which, up to this second I had half believed was a fake. I could now see that the mass of tentacles between the legs surrounded a wet, slot-like opening lined with spiky teeth. It looked like the ultimate misogynist’s vision of a vagina. The part of the body with the “bunny ears” that I has assumed was the head, would occasionally bend down and squeeze out yellowish lumps on the floor. That puckered orifice was exactly what it looked like. Now and then one of them would assume a posture with the bunny ear end straight up and briefly the outline of BooJoo the Happy Bunny could be seen.

“Lower your weapon, Captain.” Iverson was standing in front of us. Marcia stuck the pistol into the belt of her jeans and saluted.

I said, “General I’d like to see a lawyer.”

The General smiled. “This is not a legally formal situation. You are not under arrest. You are being detained as a matter of national security.” Before I could ask any other questions, he looked at Hines. “Doctor Hines, you have really disappointed me. Even when this man had the tapes, he hadn’t put the pieces together and when we took them back, that shouldn’t have been a signal to you to fill in the blanks. I don’t understand how such a smart man can be so *stupid*. I have to go over this situation carefully to decide what we’re going to do next.” A pair of MPs escorted us to a room and locked us in. It looked like a conference room with a single long table surrounded with chairs and a water cooler in one corner. There was a phone on the wall that had been disconnected and my cell couldn’t find service in there. There was a whiteboard with markers near the head of the conference table. Hines sat down looking pretty deflated. Jerry still looked scared.

Charley said, “They are going to charge me with treason.”

“Treason?”

“We’re at war.”

“Charley, I just don’t get it. Why put a buju on TV if it’s such a big hairy secret?”

“We needed to show them we were stronger than them to convince them that it wasn’t worth their while to attack us. Communication with Moof by opening the dimensional doorway took too much power to do often, but we discovered that one range of television frequency possessed a, how do I express it to a layman... ‘common vibration’, that could be utilized to reach

the bujus. They could pick up messages broadcast on that frequency. Unfortunately for us, so could most television sets as the same frequency was used by a local television station. We decided that it would be possible to hide our message in the context of a TV show. We thinly disguised a captured buju so that we could show it in a state of submission to us. We hid the creature's mouth parts and root stub with a big pair of blue shorts and its genital/manipulators with oven mitts. Facial features were attached to a plug inserted into the creature's excretory orifice. We composed the BooJoo songs that contained warnings and outright threats in the buju language and had people on the show who illustrated our greater military, industrial and scientific power without actually giving any secrets away. We used the phrases 'Moof, woo' which means 'Moof in ruins' and 'flambadula' which means 'we will dance in your meadows' frequently. The whole idea was to get them to rethink the idea of attacking us. It was a risky and far from perfect plan and we abandoned it after only a short run in favor of a satellite in orbit of Moof that we occasionally upload new propaganda messages to. So far, those messages have helped keep the bujus wary of us."

Jerry said, "That's just nuts."

"Maybe, but it has worked. There have been no attempts from their side to cross into our world and when we cross into theirs they only make threats from a distance. So far, our war with the bujus has remained a cold one."

I was still confused. "How were you able to get it on the air?"

"The Air Force simply bought the air time. No one was going to advertise on a piece of crap like the BooJoo show so we lifted local commercials from other parts of the country. We had adds for real estate agents in Kentucky and hair salons in Florida and of course, Air Force recruiting spots."

"Yeah, I remember thinking that the commercials were weird for a kid's show."

Jerry muttered, "Did I imagine it, or did one of them shit out of his face? It doesn't even have eyes."

"You didn't imagine it, but that's not its face." Hines stood up and started illustrating on the whiteboard. "The buju doesn't really have a front or back side and they move in any direction with equal comfort. It doesn't have a lot of localized organs. Circulation and respiration are handled by tubes that run throughout the entire body. The same goes for the brain which is the entire decentralized neural network. The creature's entire surface is dotted with tiny light receptors, we call them *omatiddia*, by which they can assemble a very good visual image. The same goes for hearing which is accomplished with hundreds of tiny sensors in the skin. The baggy structure on what looks like the creature's rump is the root body. If a buju has trouble finding food it

can root into the ground for nourishment. That is how they start life, in fact rooted like a plant. No inhabitant of Moof is either a plant or an animal. Those designations have no meaning there and they are different from life on Earth at the cellular and even molecular level. Its whole surface is covered with tiny, blood-gorged, respiratory organs that are halfway between leaves and gills. That's why it has the pink color and fluffy looking surface. The two arm-like bracts end in a bunch of manipulatory tentacles, the number of which varies from individual to individual. Buried within this mass is what looks like a horny beak. This is the genital organ. The buju have two sexes that have been designated alpha and beta. Neither exactly corresponds to male or female. The organs are identical in both sexes although the betas have a smooth area around the cloacum that plays no role in mating. It may simply be a marking. The principal difference between the sexes is genetic. In mating one buju uses one of its genital beaks to nip a piece of flesh off of a buju of the opposite sex. This act can be performed by either sex. After mating, the beak is sealed shut and drops off within a few hours. The buju buries it in the ground where it takes root as a new buju." Charlie was animated and enthusiastic as he lectured. This was his element.

I was slightly disgusted. "How does the other buju react to having a piece of it nipped off?"

"They don't seem to have pain or pleasure in exactly the same way we do. Humans have kind of a neurological punishment and reward system. Bujus are less likely to be greatly disabled by a wound than a human and therefore seem to suffer less pain. They have only a few localized major organs, all are part of the digestive tract. They have no heart, lungs or central nervous system. They have no major bones and their muscles are usually individual cells attached directly to neurons and tiny hard lever organs. The levers are like bones, but none of them are more than a centimeter long and there are thousands and thousands of them in a buju body. That's why a buju could look like a humanoid bunny, he can make his joints bend *anywhere*. If a small piece of flesh is removed, the buju suffers only slight distress. Bujus can also reproduce from a piece of flesh falling on the ground if they are injured, but a buju that grows from this kind of event has a short lifespan and only animal level intelligence."

Joey asked, "What's up with the ears?"

"Those are secondary bracts. When the buju is rooted early in life, they support a photochemical canopy sort of like leaves. They accumulate nutrients that they form from sunlight and soil chemicals. As they become engorged with these nutrients, they swell up and become less efficient so they die and fall off at which point, the larval buju eats them. Shortly after

the last one falls off, the young buju will uproot itself and become a mobile creature. After that, the auxiliary bracts simply contain a particularly high concentration of sensory cells.”

General Iverson entered the room with Marcia at his side. “My God, Charlie.”, he said, “You just can’t help yourself, can you?” He looked over at me and Jerry. “You gentlemen have committed no crime and I don’t think you can do us much harm. The existence of the bujus was revealed to no great effect in a supermarket tabloid a few years back, mostly due to lack of evidence beyond the story itself. Moving pictures of a living buju would provide that evidence therefore we are not going to allow you keep the videos of the BooJoo show. ”

“Aren’t you afraid we’re going to tell people about this?”

“We’re virtually certain you will, but without proof, it’s harmless. Just another UFO or Bigfoot story.”

We were led out, this time not at gunpoint. We were taken past the enclosure that contained the bujus and I paused before the barred door. One of the creatures approached, it looked like it was backing toward me, but I remembered that they did not have a preferred facing direction. Hell, they don’t have faces. It said “Bujutha hapibuni” In a clear voice although I couldn’t quite figure out how the voice was produced or what part of the creature’s body it came from. There was a plethora of odd smells coming from the enclosure, neither good nor bad, but all odd. It reached toward me through the bars with one of its ‘bracts’ and I felt it touch me just as I was roughly pulled away by Marcia.

She held me tight against herself for a split second before releasing me. Man, she *really* smelled great. “Those things are dangerous!”, She said. “Don’t ever let one touch you.”

I looked back at the buju. “Bujutha hapibuni!”, it said again.

“Shut up!”, Snapped Marcia and she quickly lead me away. I was about to say something, but thought better of it at the last second.

Charley drove us back to where our car was parked apologizing for getting us into this the entire time.

Jerry was a bit more freaked out than I was. He was talking about suing the Air Force. I didn’t think that would be such a swift idea. The Air Force would just keep throwing lawyers at him until he gave up or was dead, whichever came first. “This isn’t just rats!” He kept exclaiming.

I reached to my breast pocket for my sunglasses and they clicked against something. There was something round and hard in my pocket. I pulled it out. It was about the size of a pinball, but looked like swirly, horn-colored plastic. There was ridge that ran around its entire diameter in a zig-zag

pattern. I held it up for Charley to see and said, “What the hell is this?”

He jerked the wheel hard and suddenly other drivers were honking at us. “Holy Jesus!”

“Shit! Will you be careful?! You’re gonna get us fucking killed!”

He straightened out the car and pulled over. “That is a buju egg!”

“Egg?”

“Egg or seed. We have never really been able to decide which it’s more like. That buju must have given it to you when it touched you.”

“My God, why would it do that?”

“It probably assumed you would plant it. That must have been a pretty ignorant buju. I doubt it could grow and be healthy on Earth. The soil is all wrong and the food here lacks all kinds of nutrients that a growing buju would need.”

“That’s it!”, Said Jerry.

“What?”

“Proof! You show that to the right scientist and they’ll know it’s not from Earth!”

“Charlie,” I asked, “How long will this thing keep?”

“A while. A few months.”

“Could we grow a buju if we supplied the soil with the right chemicals? Could we make foods it could eat? Having a genuine living alien would be pretty convincing stuff!”

“You don’t understand! Earth doesn’t even have the right atmosphere for a buju. Not enough oxygen and too much carbon dioxide and the air pressure is way too low. A buju on Earth is like a human being at the top of mount Everest. A buju on Earth is faint and disoriented most of the time. While most bacteria and viruses won’t effect them, some Earthly molds and funguses will be virulent diseases for them. A buju couldn’t grow up healthy on Earth.”

“Look, you have the resources of MIT. Can’t we come up with something?”

“You’re just assuming that I agree with you that the existence of the bujus needs to be made public and I’m not sure that I do.”

“C’mon, man, the whole theory of our government is that things take place with informed consent, Gulf II, Viet Nam and the Spanish American war notwithstanding.”

“Jake, this is way, way beyond politics!”

“There is a *war* on and the people of the USA don’t know about it! Does the president even know?”

“The other branches of the military don’t even know, only the portion of

the Air Force under command of General Iverson and some select academics. Iverson took autocratic control after Colonel Johns had his heart attack. That was four presidents ago. Iverson is running his own war with his own people without oversight.”

I’ve always been a mix-it-up guy. The battle attracts me as much as the cause. This guy running his own little war with an alternate universe needed some public scrutiny.

“Charlie, these guys have screwed up your whole professional life! You discovered a way to contact alternate universes and the Air Force took that discovery away from you! How have you sat there and done nothing about it all these years?”

“It’s not that simple! I’m a patriotic American! The Air Force needs to protect the people of this nation!”

“From harm, but not from knowledge. You’re a teacher. How does it make you feel suppressing information?”

“I’m already in a lot of trouble.”

“They can’t touch you without making the reason why public, or if you have made the reason why public first.”

“What do you have in mind?” Asked Hines.

“You know how to open up a passage to Moof.”

“And you are completely insane.”

Building 34 at MIT is believed by members of the public who are curious about such things, to house an outmoded gravitational antenna laboratory that has not been used in about ten years. Charlie had a key and let us in. The room was cluttered with a number of bulky old DOS computers on desks that surrounded a sort of thrown together looking piece of apparatus. There were big coils of heavy copper wire and a number of large vacuum tubes. There was at the center a steel sphere about three times the size of a bowling ball with a few light spots of rust on the surface just resting sort of off center on an old wooden office desk surrounded by a ring of five coils. There were heavy electric cables snaking all over the floor. All of the coils and cables had yellowed paper stickers on them with numbers written in ballpoint pen . “This is where it first happened.” Said Charlie.

I called Lauren Vrabec on my cell phone and told her to get down there with a cameraman. Things were about to get interesting. He clicked a switch on one of the cables and booted up the computers. “Wait until the news people get here!” I said.

Hines had taken on a distracted look, like he was barely there, as if he thought he was dreaming all of this. “It will take a little while for stuff to

warm up.” He all but mumbled. The steel sphere started to levitate off the desk and centered itself between the coils. It started to rotate very slowly. I followed one rust spot as it turned and figured that it took a little under a minute to make its first rotation. About a second less for the second rotation. It was accelerating.

Lauren showed up when the sphere was spinning about five times a minute with a sweaty fat guy named Marty in tow. Marty had a big news camcorder with a mike plugged into it that Lauren was holding. “What is this?” She asked me, “I thought you were tracking down a children’s show from the ‘70’s.”

“And this is where it lead me. Just watch and get this all on tape.”

The sphere was now spinning at a pretty good clip and the large vacuum tubes were glowing brightly.

Hines made a few adjustments in the computer control of the coils and suddenly the steel sphere seemed to triple in size and take on the appearance of rippling water. I have no idea how fast it was now rotating or even if it was still rotating at all. It seemed more like a floating membrane. Charlie tapped a few keys and suddenly the ripples smoothed out and we had a clear view into...somewhere. Rust colored hills and ponds of dark water, bizarre looking trees. A fairly strong wind was blowing outward from the strange phenomenon and it carried with it a riot of alien odors. "This is the planet Moof.", said Charlie.

Lauren walked a little closer, her eyes wide. "This is amazing! Another planet in a hole in the air?" She looked at me. "Jake, what does this have to do with...what was it, 'BooJoo the Happy Bunny'?"

As if on cue a pair of "ears" popped up over a nearby rock visible in the hole in space. "Bujutha hapibuni!" came a strange voice.

A broad smile bloomed on Lauren's face. Oh God, she thought it was cute! That lasted slightly less than one second as the rest of the creature reared up from behind the rock, its toothed, slot-like mouth dripping, tentacles waving and looking for all the world like some sort of Lovecraftian nightmare. Lauren screamed. This wasn't just a little yelp of surprise, uh-uh, this would have done Fay Wray proud! She dropped her microphone and scooted behind Marty who dutifully kept taping and sweating.

I know that it was a pretty alarming sight, God knows *I* was alarmed, but I just figured that an experienced newswoman would have a bit more gumption. I said "Maybe you ought to shut it down for a minute, Charlie."

"Have we got enough footage?"

Before anyone could answer him, the buju leapt through the hole with an amazing display of agility. And landed right in front of Marty. Marty just

took a couple of steps back but held the camera rock steady. Lauren abandoned him and fled to a far corner of the room. The buju swatted the camera out of Marty's hands with one of its bracts. Maybe it thought it was a weapon.

"Charlie!, Shut it down!" I hollered.

"Another fine mess!" Snarled Jerry in my direction.

"I didn't make you come! You wanted to see that chick."

The buju suddenly rushed at Charlie before he could tap anymore keys and knocked him over. In less time than it takes to tell it five more bujus appeared in the hole and jumped through. I was belatedly starting to wonder if things were getting out of control. Jerry had already decided and grabbed me by the collar dragging me toward the door. We slammed the door behind us just in time to see an olive drab truck pull up at the door of building 34. Marcia, now in uniform, jumped out with a pistol in hand followed by Iverson and six MP's. They seemed to mean business.

Marcia pointed the gun at us and demanded, "What's going on in there?"

"Hi Marcia!", said Jerry brightly.

Marcia looked him dead in the eye and smiled sweetly. "What was your name again?"

Jerry blushed slightly. "It's Jerry!", he said.

"Shut the fuck up, *Jerry*."

The door behind us suddenly burst open and Lauren, Marty and Charlie came running out as fast as they could. They just pushed past everyone including the MP's totally ignoring their guns and orders to halt. The reason why became apparent less than a second later when dozens of bujus poured through the doors. This time I grabbed Jerry and ran toward the news van after Lauren, Marty (who was still attempting to tape the goings on) and Charlie who was just following them. I saw Marcia empty her pistol into a buju before it knocked it out of her hand, and ran off.

As the news van peeled out the MP's raised pistols at us but Iverson signaled them to stand down. He probably figured that it wouldn't be such a good idea for the Air Force to be shooting at the news media on a public street.

It was Lauren who had taken the wheel and she was holding on with a vise grip. Tendons stood out on the back of her hands like mountains on a relief map. Marty was shouting at her. "Slow down! Where the hell are you going? The story is over there!"

She stomped on the brake just outside of the parking lot throwing random bits of equipment around the back of the van where Jerry, Charlie and I were trying to hang on for dear life. She whipped around and stared at me with

wide eyes. "What was that? What are those monsters?" She looked like she was about to burst into tears or burst out laughing, I wasn't sure which.

"Those are bujus.", Said Charlie.

I looked at Lauren. "I was going to explain. They were what the Air Force was trying to cover up with the BooJoo show."

"That doesn't make any sense!"

Charlie said, "I know. They know. It didn't last long."

"Just long enough to get a few people interested." Said Jerry.

I looked back toward the parking lot where the bujus were now charging about as the MP's took occasional shots at them. None of the bujus were brought down by the gunfire although one of them was left limping. More bujus were still dribbling out of the door of the lab building and it looked like there were now about fifty of them.

As the general and Marcia talked frantically on cell phones, the bujus started moving as a group toward Massachusetts avenue.

"Hey!", I said, "They're making for Central Square!"

"There is something like a thousand people up there!" Cried Lauren.

"This ought to be good!" Chuckled Marty. "Get on the gas, lady. We gotta head 'em off and get the shot!"

Lauren finally seemed to get it together at that point. "Right, get the shot. Lets go." She hit the gas and Marty climbed into the back and started taping the horde of bujus as they followed us.

I turned to Charlie. "How much damage can they do? They're unarmed, right?"

"I don't think they can do that much. They are about as strong as a man, so I suppose they can beat people up. They are certainly going to scare the pants off of a lot of folks."

"Aren't they going to just keep coming through that hole in space?"

"No. The bridge decays after a few minutes. If it isn't closed already, it will be soon."

Just as we came down to the near end of the Square, some of the bujus paused to stomp on some decorative plants in front of the firehouse, the Shaw's market and the Salvation Army. We could hear that they were shouting the word "flambadula" over and over again. "They think the plants are our young." Said Charlie.

"Stomping on flowers..wow! I guess they're really out fix our wagon." I said. "Can we stop by the Seven Eleven so I can get some smokes?" Every one in the van just glared at me in silence.

"Maybe later." Said Jerry caustically.

A tight knot of bujus swarmed up the middle of Massachusetts avenue and

cars were swerving to get out of their way. One got hit by a Dudley bus but stood right back up with one of its bracts hanging loosely and quickly rejoined the pack. "Tough little bastards." Said Marty.

"No centralized organs." Said Charley. "They can take a lot of punishment and keep on going."

"Huh. Energizer bujus." I said to Charlie. "I thought you said the air is bad for them on Earth."

"It is. They will all be dead within a day if we can't get them back through to Moof."

Lauren pulled to a stop right near a liquor store because most of the bujus had stopped and were stomping on whatever plants there were, flowers, grass or even weeds sticking up through the pavement. "What the hell are they doing?" She asked.

"They think they're killing our children. They start their lives like plants and they assume that we do too."

"Why?"

"Because we are at war, only no one knows it but Iverson and his cronies."

"War!" Lauren was appalled but there was a little twinkle in her eye that I didn't like. I think it was the vision of a Pulitzer prize or whatever hell they give local television journalists. No matter what it was, she was a little jazzed now. Lauren smoothed her hair and snapped at Marty, "Get us ready for a stand-up in thirty seconds! Call in for a special report!" She jumped out of the van followed by Marty with his camera, tripod and a half mile of cable.

The bujus were still a ways down the block, but they were starting to spread out. I was afraid that some of them might have already made their way down side streets doing God-knows-what. Even so, I dodged into the liquor store for a pack of Chesterfields. If I was going to watch a war in Central Square, I was damn well going to have a butt while it happened.

I don't want to sound like I didn't care, but these bujus just didn't look like much of a threat, and this is from a guy who worries about lab rats. When I came out I had to swiftly revise that opinion. Just as I emerged from the liquor store I found myself face to (more or less) face with a buju who waved its bracts at me aggressively. "Bujuthahapibuni!", I shouted at it.

The critter froze in its tracks with only its tentacles slowly waving for a second then it ran off without the benefit of turning around. I have no idea what it must have thought.

All traffic had stopped and a bunch of bujus had turned over a car that had honked at them and were jumping up and down on it while the driver fled in terror. Things were getting a little more out of hand than I had predicted.

Some of the bujus were chasing people around and there was a lot of shouting. That's when a trio of hummers came up from the direction of Harvard Square. One of them had a machine gun mounted on it. The air was suddenly filled with the shrill cry of sirens. Oh shit. This was not good. The square was starting to fill up with cops who were moving people along and occasionally using batons on bujus.

"Maybe we ought to split." Said Jerry as he gently tugged on my sleeve. "They got the big guns."

I nodded my head as I lit a butt. "Yeah. A little out of our depth here." We turned to mosey down a side street when we came face to face with Marcia who, of course, had a gun pointed at us. "Oh hell! You know, you are not nearly as charming as you seemed."

"It's my cross to bear. You guys aren't going anywhere."

"Why not? We don't know anything that everyone else won't within a couple of hours."

"I'm going to have you charged with treason. We are at war!"

"A war the president doesn't even know about!"

At that moment Iverson showed up. He put his hand on Marcia's shoulder. "Stand down, Captain." He said. "These gentlemen are free to go."

There were suddenly a *lot* of military guys in Central Square. Lauren was a ways up the street doing a stand-up special report with her intense investigative reporter face on. Charlie was standing next to her with a pained expression answering questions. Bujus were still running around intoning the word "flambadula" over and over again while stamping on every plant they could find, but one by one they were being captured, restrained and tossed into the back of a truck.

Iverson ordered Marcia to get lost and then drew me and Jerry aside. "You gentleman are in an interesting position. I only hope you're smart enough to make the most of it."

"Jerry eyed him suspiciously. "How do you mean?"

"You have become less important to us now that the existence of our conflict with the bujus is going to have to become general knowledge."

"You mean you're not going to just seal off the whole area?" I asked.

"No. Because of her," He motioned toward Lauren, "we could never pull it off. There are also all these people with cell-phone cameras. We just couldn't keep a lid on the story."

"So where does that leave us?"

"The rest of the government and the public will now be in the loop, which is going to make handling this problem a lot more difficult. I expect action to slow to a crawl. Assuming that I don't have to face major discipline, I expect

to remain in charge, though. I'm hoping that you know better than to portray our actions in a bad light. I'm a much better friend than an enemy. You gentlemen are free to go."

We split back for Jerry's apartment where we had a couple of drinks and watched Lauren on TV. By early evening, the military guys had rounded up most of the bujus. A few had been killed and I'm guessing that a few more ended up in detention in Roxbury, but they showed on the news a clip of many of them being sent back through to Moof at a large transport doorway that I presume was also at the Roxbury facility.

Everyone knows that this was a big story and made national news. It still bums me out that I never got any of the credit for breaking it. The president even talked about it mispronouncing all the technical words as he did. Except is specialized venues, the story was all but gone after a few news cycles. A few internet sites and newsgroups sprung up about Moof and the bujus, but a lack of hard information had most of them descending into wild speculation almost from the start.

I started to write a book about it, but getting quotes and interviews seemed to be nearly impossible. Charlie Hines had been forced into retirement by MIT and didn't want to talk to me. Lauren didn't return my calls, particularly after she got a job with the network co-hosting their popular morning show. Iverson just laughed at me when I actually got through to him. He wished me luck, but offered no help. "You're on your own, Zimmer." He said.

At least I still had my job, but I had nothing to show for my research on the BooJoo show. Except...

I wasn't quite sure how to proceed so I just went out and got some potting soil and an oxygen cylinder to start. I was going to have to trust my luck with adjusting the soil chemistry. I put the weird little egg thing in the soil and dribbled extra oxygen into a tent made from a laundry bag. About a week later, a pink bulbous mass had appeared with a fat orange leaf like thing. I'm going to name him Bunny.

*Man, I would **love** to be able to tell you that I had grown up with the OZ books and the work of L. Frank Baum, but it's not the case. I became an OZ fan as an adult. I love the notion of a thoroughly twentieth century fairy tale. The Magic Powder of OZ is written with reference only to material written by Baum and none of the later Royal Historians. The reason this story is here is because I wanted to bring an **issue** to Emerald City.*

The Magic Powder of OZ

Chapter 1

*A brief recap of events surrounding the life and times of
his former majesty, the Scarecrow*

History is a funny thing because it never turns out to be the way you think perhaps it ought to be and added upon that, it never stops.

From the point of view of this writer, the single event that would most shape the modern era in these fairy lands after the rule of the Witches save for the appearance of the Witchslayer herself, happened in 1899 in a cornfield in Munchkinland. In that field stood a pole that held up a scarecrow. A very crooked munchkin climbed a ladder leaned against the pole and dusted the scarecrow lightly with a powder and performed a magic ritual. First upon one foot he stood and extended his left fist upward with the pinkie finger extended and cried out “Weaugh!” and standing on the other extended his right fist upward with the thumb extended and he spoke the word “Teaugh!” With both feet planted firmly he raised both hands upward, fingers spread and shouted “Peaugh!” The scarecrow twitched and the pupils of its painted eyes shifted from side to side.

This munchkin, Dr. Pipt by name, didn't stay to closely examine the fruits of his labor as it was only a first test of his new alchemical formulation soon to be known as The Powder of Life. The use on this unimportant scarecrow was merely a proof of concept that could be safely forgotten. He looked up

at the new life that hung on the pole and said, "I'm afraid you won't be much good, you have not a brain in your head."

Speaking for the first time ever, and from a mouth that was merely painted on at that, the Scarecrow said, "I don't?"

"No. Only straw. A moment from now, you will not even remember how you came to be alive."

"How did I come to be alive?"

"It is of no importance to a brainless thing like yourself."

"It seems like it *ought* to be important."

"Trust me. It is not." And with that, Dr. Pipt made his way out of the cornfield.

The implications of this event were far reaching indeed. As a direct result, the rule of the Witches would come to a close and the scion of Pastoria would be restored to the throne uniting all of the lands bordered by the Deadly Desert under a legitimate single ruler. Of course, the Wizard had previously given himself the mantle of ruler of all of Oz, but effectively he had been a prisoner in Emerald City, stricken with terror of the Witches of the East and The West. The girl who came to slay those Witches and induced the Witches of the North and South to swear fealty to Emerald City and at the same time exposed the Wizard as a fraud profoundly accelerated the engine of history.

The Scarecrow, as per Dr. Pipt's instructions, dutifully forgot his own origin within a few seconds and hung on the pole with barely a thought in his straw filled head until Dorothy came along.

As I previously said, but it bears repeating, history is a funny thing. That which was once a lifeless straw dummy, by way of an incredible series of adventures became a king. While his tenure on the throne of Oz was short lived, for he was deposed in an equally incredible series of events, he remained a respected citizen and a beloved character in Emerald City.

The Army that deposed him was made up of girls from all over the land of Oz armed only with knitting needles and determination and were led by General Jinjur, a Munchkin maiden who styled herself as queen of Oz until Glinda, the Witch of the South removed her from power and placed Ozma on the throne bringing stability to Oz and not incidentally, creating for herself a permanent position of power and still maintained her own palace and court to the south and ruled over the Quadlings and knew everything that transpired in Oz because all that happened was magically written in her Great Book. In spite of the fact that she was a very powerful sorceress and was considered "good", very little was actually known of her. One thing that was known was the fact that she was individually the most powerful person

in Oz being the most adept of a small number of people granted license to practice magic by Queen Ozma. Of course, Ozma was granted license to rule by Glinda.

Chapter 2

The Centennial Celebration

By the year 2004, Ozma had occupied the throne of Oz for one hundred years. Of course since no one ages or has died in Oz since the time it became an enchanted land, she still appears to be a girl of about sixteen. The onlooker should not be fooled into thinking this queen lacks experience or wisdom merely because she wears the face of a fresh and lovely young girl. Indeed, few in the land of Oz surpass the queen in beauty, but she is regarded to be as strong of mind and will as she is radiant of countenance. Ozma is much beloved by her people who believe that they owe their wealth, stability and happiness to her wise and benign rule.

Since shortly after she attained the throne, Ozma has had a companion by her side. That person is the princess Dorothy, born Dorothy Gale of Kansas, USA. She is as legendary a figure as could be imagined. She rode to Oz on the back of a tornado and killed the Witch of the East by dropping a house on her and becoming the owner of her enchanted silver shoes. She found the Scarecrow, freed Nick Chopper, the Tin Woodman and found the Cowardly Lion in the wilderness along the Yellow Brick road. She brought them all to Emerald City where she met with the Wizard who agreed to endow the Scarecrow with his now famous brain, Nick Chopper with the heart he had lost and the Lion with an understanding of courage and return Dorothy to Kansas. This was promised on the condition that Dorothy slay the Witch of the West as she had the Witch of the East. This writer doesn't believe the Wizard expected Dorothy to be able to accomplish this task and assumed he would be troubled no further by the girl and her companions. To his great surprise, the group reappeared at the palace in Emerald City having successfully done away with the witch. The Wizard was revealed as a fraud who, like Dorothy, originated in the USA and possessed no real magical

powers. He was, however, wise and educated. He was able to satisfy the Lion with a pep-talk and provided the Tin Man with a heart to serve as the symbolic home of his tortured soul. He thought that his providing a “brain” for the Scarecrow was a similar symbolic act, but he was unaware that the Scarecrow was animated by the powder of life and would have been unaware of what that implied had he known. The brain he created to insert in the flour sack* that served the Scarecrow for a head was merely a small cloth bag filled with bran and pins.

The powder of life acts on suggested shapes and purposes, which is why the scarecrow was able to see through eyes that were mere spots of paint. When the brain was placed in his head he was endowed with a marvelous intelligence that he had not previously possessed. This proved to be the solution to his last problem. With the death of the two evil witches and the Wizard’s exposure as a humbug, Oz was left with something of a power vacuum and could be easily overrun by malign forces. The Wizard decided to personally take Dorothy back to Kansas and placed the Scarecrow on the throne of Oz. It turned out that the Wizard and Dorothy left Oz separately, he in a balloon and she with the aid of the silver shoes. Both would return to Oz when Ozma had become queen.

Dorothy had become the great national heroine of Oz. When she returned to Oz to stay bringing her aunt and uncle along, she was given the title of princess by Ozma and they became the very closest of friends. Even with a royal title, Dorothy remained at heart a simple farm girl. She eschewed the extravagant fashions of the Ozites in favor of close variants on the frocks affected by young girls in her land of origin. As a result of this, she always had a certain atmosphere of foreignness surrounding her person in the eyes of the natives. All of the people in Oz who had originated in America held a high position at court in Emerald City. This writer assumes that were this not a happy fairy land, there might have been mutterings amongst the populace regarding this. To Dorothy’s credit, she never once in a hundred years asserted her power as a princess or carried herself in a manner that was anything but generous and humble. Indeed Dorothy was the perfect national heroine for she was beloved by all the people as the bravest, kindest and most modest girl in all the land. Like Ozma, she was dedicated to improving upon any fault in any person. Even the deaths of the two witches that she was involved in were quite by accident though that fact was not well publicized.

Self-Rising Flour

**Whenever the Scarecrow removed his hat, Munchkinland’s Finest Brand could be clearly seen printed on the back of his head.*

It was Dorothy whose idea it was to have a great celebration to commemorate Ozma's hundredth year as queen. The rulers of every fairy land were to be invited and the parties, concerts, games and feasts would last two weeks. Dorothy also arranged to have a statue of Ozma placed in Pastoria park facing that of her father.

The plan was not without its problems, though.

Chapter 3

Victor's Discontent

Victor Columbia Edison had never been content. From the instant of his creation he had been an outcast, a victim of insults, an object of abuse. This in spite of the fact that he was one of the true living wonders of the land of Oz. Victor was a wind-up acoustic phonograph that had been animated with the fabled magic powder in the strange accident that accompanied the birth of Scraps, the Patchwork Girl. His music was largely unappreciated and his speaking voice was even more so, thus Victor took up a solitary life in the deep forests of Munchkin Land while his "sister" Scraps, the Patchwork Girl went on to great fame and regard throughout the land. Yes, Victor was not content. He was, in fact bitter and over the years plotted again and again in his mind how he would pay the world back for the unfairness of his existence.

Life in the forest was unsuitable for a phonograph. Moisture had caused his cabinet to warp, his mechanism to vary in speed and his cactus needle to soften, thus making his sound quality even more objectionable over the years. Eventually, he knew he would have to leave the forest for the city if he was to endure at all. Paradoxically, in spite of the fact he hated his life, he still knew that it would be made even worse should he lose his ability to move or make sounds.

One day Victor Columbia Edison marched up the Yellow Brick Road upon his spindly wooden cabinet legs playing a merry, if scratchy and

distorted, march. He managed to get himself admitted to the city by dropping the name of Bungle, The Glass Cat. Bungle had been a vain and disagreeable creature, but was born in the same household as Victor, and animated by the same means, and therefore might feel some kinship toward him. Victor didn't know that the cat had been remade with a greater sense of modesty. Bungle, even though vastly changed in temperament since the last time they had seen one another, was still less than enthused to see Victor.

Bungle was a strange and beautiful creature. She resembled a normal house cat in every particular although each and every one of those particulars was sculpted in clear glass. The general transparency was only interrupted by a heart that was made from a large ruby and his eyes that were shining emeralds. At one time, Bungle had possessed pink brains that could be seen to be working in her head but they had been replaced with transparent ones to tame her arrogance. Now she was a being of kind and modest temperament and therefore, in spite of misgivings, agreed to sponsor Victor's admission to Emerald City.

So now the two unnatural beings walked side by side in Pastoria Park, the huge and beautifully maintained area of grass, flowers and trees that served for the recreation and relaxation of all who dwelt in the city. Every plant of every type that could be found in the entire land of Oz could also be found in Pastoria Park thanks to the scientific labors of Professor Wogglebug and the agricultural students of his University.

"Victor", inquired Bungle, "what has moved you after these many years to come to Emerald City?"

The phonograph answered with scratchy cacophony. "Life in the wilds treats me poorly. My finish is chipped and dulled, my horn has become dented, my needle dirty. I require shelter from the elements. I also seek my relations, those who, like myself, have been animated by the Powder of Life."

"My goodness, many of those reside in this city and their numbers continue to grow! Even though magic is outlawed, some of the powder gets out every once in a while and more beings become animated."

"Really? More since us, Jack Pumpkinhead, the Sawhorse and the Patchwork Girl?"

"Many more. Hundreds."

They stopped in the shade of a lunch-pail tree. Not being creatures that required food, neither one of them picked the fruit, which were full lunch-pails, containing sandwiches and other good things to eat. Victor considered what the cat had said. "Our needs are so different from those of creatures that were born of other creatures. I think I have needs and wants, but without

the need for food or the urge to reproduce, I am hard pressed to speculate what they might be. I might be moved to say it is simply to enjoy life, but my own life as been one of hardship and rejection almost from the instant I became aware.”

“Your story is a sad one,” commented the Glass Cat. “My lot in life has been better as I am shaped more like something that looks like a living thing and I was brought to life on purpose. Many of us, ‘the animated’ I suppose you should call us, are, like yourself, the result of mishap.”

“Yes, we are the animated as opposed to the born. Our real difference from them is that we cannot reproduce after our kind.”

Bungle laughed. “Is it your fond desire to raise a brood of little phonographs? The only way for our kind to make more of ourselves is to use the Powder of Life which is against the law.”

“But you say there are hundreds of us.”

“Indeed there are, all the result of accident or illegal deeds. People have attempted to make servants using the powder and Doctor Pipt was unable to keep the method of its manufacture a secret so every few years someone makes a batch and animated beings start to appear until the batch has run out.”

“Do they all live in Emerald City?”

“A large number of them do. Some are unsuited to the constraints of society here and, like you, chose to live in the wilds. Some are so poorly suited to posses the spark of life that they mostly behave as if they were still inanimate aroused to action only by extremity.”

Victor pondered what he had heard. “How many of our kind are prominent persons?”

“Not too many... The Saw Horse is the queen’s official mount. Jack Pumpkinhead considers himself to be her son. Scraps is perhaps the most famous. Of course all of the animated are considered to be unique and interesting”

“Not the Tin Woodman? Tik-Tok? The Scarecrow?”

“None of them are animated by the magic powder as we are. Tik-Tok is a mere machine and must have three springs wound in order to function. The Tin Man is a prosthetic device that replaces the entire body of Nick Chopper. It is unknown how the Scarecrow came to be alive but he has never claimed that it was because of the Powder of Life.”

“So we are mere oddities? Mere decorations on the landscape of Ozite civilization yet without legality or legitimacy?”

“Victor, you are so very dramatic.” Said the cat in a bored tone of voice.

The phonograph played a second of loud, scratchy and backward march music. “Don’t mock me puss! I will be something to be reckoned with around here!” Victor cocked his horn and stalked away blaring a polka at inconsistent playback speed.

Bungle shrugged, turned around and headed for the palace.

Chapter 4

Called to Attend

The Wizard of Oz sat in his office/laboratory in the palace. The Wizard (or simply Oz*, as he preferred to be called) was brilliant but somewhat excentric individual who on most occasions could be seen hurrying from place to place in Emerald city. He was a very busy man even though he held no official position in the royal court. He was a servant of both Ozma and of Glinda and was also one of few people in the magical land of Oz actually legally licensed to practice magic.

On this morning, Oz sat in his large and comfortable office with The Scarecrow. These two possessed an amity of long standing and easily shared confidence and the Scarecrow had come to Oz on this day because he had been stricken with a sense of unease.

A week before, the Scarecrow had visited the land of the Quadlings on business for Ozma and stopped at the palace of Glinda to pay his respects.

He now sat recalling the visit to Oz. “I was greeted by Glinda who, as always, was gracious and beautiful, but she seemed also somewhat distracted. It turned out that there was a minor land dispute among the Quadlings in which she had to intervene. She offered apologies and excused herself for this mission while granting me freedom of her palace until she returned. There is much entertainment to be found in Glinda’s palace where there are displayed wonders not only from the land of OZ but also from many of the lands beyond the Deadly Desert.

**In one of the very many strange coincidences that pepper the history of the land of Oz, the Wizard, for most of his life well before he ever came to the land of Oz, was known to people intimates and strangers alike as Oz. He was born Oscar Zoroaster Phadrig Isaac Norman Hinkle Emmanuel Ambrose Diggs, but early in life took to using his first two initials.*

“The hours of Glinda’s absence flew by as I beheld one oddity after another. I came finally to a room that was occupied only by a small table on which there sat a large book. This was Glinda’s magic book in which every event in the Land of Oz, no matter how small or insignificant is recorded! Well Oz, it is to you I owe my inquiring mind, so you of all people should understand that there was no way I could resist looking within those pages.

“The book is not like other books. If you open it and you see a page that contains several paragraphs and is marked with a date at the top. If one reads over the page in a cursory manner, there is a very general outline of the days events, almost like headlines in a newspaper. However, if a certain thing catches your interest, magically that section expands in detail and will now contain all sorts of specifics and names. Focus on a name and that person’s history is detailed. Wonder what sort of clothing he might have worn that day and that description appears! What a wonder!”

The Wizard had in fact seen this book, for he was apprenticed to Glinda. Once a humbug wizard, with training from the great sorceress he had become a true wizard. “Yes, that book is indeed one of the most marvelous objects in this land of many marvels.”

“But allow me to continue, my friend, for the strangest is yet to come!” Exclaimed the Scarecrow.

“I read of many key events in the history of this land and finally I was drawn to solve the mystery of my own creation.”

The Wizard leaned forward in fascination as the Scarecrow related the story of his animation in the first use of the Magic Powder. “This is most remarkable!” Said the Wizard. “It explains so much. Doctor Pipt’s Powder of Life! Have you told Ozma? Have you told Dorothy? I can’t imagine how she’ll react.”

“No, I haven’t and I don’t know how Dorothy will react either. It’s such a...what’s that word you use?”

“Political?”

“Yes! Political! It’s such a political problem now! Before, I stood apart from the powder animated creatures with the origins of my life unknown. I could be a moderator between them and the meat people because I was neither. I have had a reputation for wisdom, but confessing this now will make me appear quite the fool!”

“Don’t feel so badly, old friend. Do you know that hardly any meat people at all remember their own birth? By the way, I believe they prefer to be called simply ‘the animated’, you know, to distinguish them from ‘the born.’”

“‘The Animated!’ Victor came up with that one, I’ll wager.”

“Who else? You know how brittle he is. Everything anyone says to him is taken as an affront. It really gets quite tiresome.”

There came a knock at the lab the door.

“Enter!” Called Oz.

A petite and attractive Gillikin girl entered. She had dark green hair cut in a pageboy bob, wore a short green satin skirt trimmed with gold threads and a green satin pill-box hat. She also wore a pair of glasses with very thick lenses that magnified her eyes to an alarming degree. She was Jellia Jamb, the queen’s personal handmaiden.

“Well, if it isn’t little Jellia Jamb!” Said Oz with a smile.

“Good morning oh great and powerful Oz!” she said cheerily.

“I have told you time and again, you don’t have to call me that. Just plain ‘Oz’ is more than adequate.”

“But I like calling you ‘great and powerful’!” She gazed at him worshipfully, batting her magnified eyelashes in his direction.

“Yes, yes,” Sighed the wizard. “So how may I help you today?”

“The Queen requests your presence in her throne room. She also asks for Mister Scarecrow.”

“Very well, you can tell her that we shall come immediately.”

The Munchkin girl continued to let her eyes linger adoringly on the Wizard. The seconds ticked on.

“You may go now, Jellia.” Said Oz. The girl jumped a bit, startled from her mooning at the Wizard. Blushing, she quickly exited the room.

“What is that about?” Inquired the Scarecrow.

“She has always acted like that around me. There is no accounting for it.”

The Scarecrow rolled his painted eyes. “I meant what do you suppose Ozma wants us for?”

“Ah! Yes,” said the Wizard, ever-so-slightly embarrassed, “Well, we shall just have to go and see, won’t we.”

The royal audience hall in the palace at Emerald City has a very credible claim to being the most magnificent room in the world. I would be very surprised to discover that there was anything similar to it anywhere. The room was first constructed when Oz established Emerald City as his capital but that was before Dorothy slew the witches and actual commerce started to take place between Emerald City and the greater countries of Oz. When the Scarecrow was on the throne then he willingly accepted tribute from all of the kingdoms of the land to decorate the palace. It was during these years that the streets of Emerald City were paved with jewels and the great frescoes were painted in the audience hall depicting the epic of Dorothy the Witch Slayer. The huge panels were heroic and Dorothy with her

companions the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion as well as little Toto were made to seem mythic and far larger than life. When Ozma was installed upon the throne, Glinda remade a good part of the hall and added the massive carved pillars, each one a huge single clear emerald. The throne was made of solid gold and encrusted with precious gems of every variety known to humanity and several that can only exist in a magic land like Oz. Behind the throne was a tapestry very nearly a quarter of an acre in area that was a map of all of the lands enclosed by the Deadly Desert. It was woven of brilliantly colored threads and all of the important locations in Oz were marked by precious gems.

Even though The Wizard and the Scarecrow had visited this hall many times and in fact both had been able to call it their own at one time, they were still filled with awe at its rich magnificence. Ozma sat on the throne in her most erect and regal pose. She was wearing her formal coronet that bore a gold letter “O” with a letter “Z” inscribed in it, the official signet of the land of OZ. Usually when the Wizard or the Scarecrow took audience with her she would be found curled up comfortably on the throne with her legs tucked under her. Her attitude signaled that this was a meeting of some importance. To the right hand side of the throne was a large couch upon which sat a large and powerful looking lion. Incongruously, he had a large bow of green ribbon in his mane. To the left was a similar couch upon which reclined an enormous, but somewhat dyspeptic looking tiger. These were the famous Cowardly Lion and the Hungry Tiger of Oz. Ozma had taken a liking to both of them and always kept them close. They also served as her personal bodyguard on those rare occasions when she needed one. In a smaller chair in front and to the right sat another girl dressed in a simple country frock with a little dog curled up in her lap. This was Princess Dorothy, Dorothy Gale, the Witch-Slayer.

The Scarecrow and the Wizard approached the throne confidently in spite of the studied formality. After all, they were all good friends. Ozma greeted them and then came straight to the point. “Thank you gentlemen for attending me. I am the luckiest of rulers to have two of my predecessors to call on for advice in difficult times.”

Almost in chorus, the Scarecrow and the Wizard responded “It is our pleasure to serve the queen.”

The Wizard of Oz asked, “How may we be of service, my queen?”

Ozma responded, “It has come to my attention that Victor Columbia Edison is having a rally today in Pastoria Park to gain support for reproductive rights for the animated. He wants me to legalize the Powder of Life”.

The Wizard and the Scarecrow were both made a trifle uncomfortable by the reference to the Powder of Life. Did Ozma suspect the truth about the Scarecrow? Had Glinda perhaps even told her? The last seemed unlikely as Glinda hardly ever dispenses information unless asked directly. Ozma would have to suspect that the Scarecrow was animated by the powder and ask Glinda first before she would tell her.

“Is that so very wrong, Your Majesty?” Asked the Scarecrow. The words had escaped his mouth before he had even a second to think about what he was saying. All in the audience hall stared at him.

Ozma replied evenly. “Dear Scarecrow! Since Oz became an enchanted land, there has been no natural death! People sometimes die in conflicts or by accident, but that does not reduce their numbers by much. This is also true of most animals. While there are some births, those born mature very slowly. I have sat on this throne for over a century and I have aged only the equivalent of three years and that is only because I and Princess Dorothy wished to experience growing up and used The Nome King’s magic belt to wish it so. The case of the yellow hen is an example of why reproduction in general must be controlled. The young chickens for some reason, perhaps because the hen originated outside of Oz, within twenty years, there were a million chickens in the land of Oz, far outnumbering humans! It was only because I begged Billina to ask them to stop hatching their eggs that crisis was averted.”

“But they produce the eggs that are a deterrent against the minions of Ruggedo!” Exclaimed the wizard.

“Yes! The minions of Ruggedo!” Sputtered the Scarecrow.

“The Land of Oz has survived quite well with but a single duck, it certainly doesn’t require a million chickens! I know the eggs are useful, but the number of chickens is far too great. The president of the Athletic College has come to me time and again much aggrieved over the impact of those chickens consuming his fellow insects. It has become a rarity to see a wogglebug besides the professor himself!” Explained Ozma.

The Scarecrow stroked his chin that had a stubble of straw protruding between the weave of the flour sack that was his head. “Yes... I can see that is a thorny problem. But why are you concerned about the animated reproducing themselves? They consume nothing and some of them are leading citizens like my beloved and beautiful Scraps!”

Ozma met the Scarecrow’s eyes intently. “Allow me to remind you that the Powder of life is illegal as is any magical substance or practice without

my specific license. Do you wish this country to again fall under the rule of witches?”

“I wish only the very best for my country,” said the Scarecrow.

“Scarecrow, you are in a position to do your queen and country a great service. Through the use of unlawfully produced Powder of life, Oz is becoming overrun with the animated. In spite of Victor’s protestations about reproductive rights, most of them have been created by the born attempting to make slaves or who are merely curious. To an individual, I have manumitted those who were slaves in hopes of ending the practice, but still it continues. I need your help to end this altogether. This very morning, Victor Columbia Edison is holding a rally of the animated in the park, this could also be your chance to address them all and explain my position.”

Chapter 5

In the Park

The Wizard of Oz and the Scarecrow entered the park through the north gate also known as Gillikin gate or Palace gate. On either side of the gate grew two large trees, one which bore banjoes at various stages of ripeness and the other had branches heavy with ice cream cones. They already heard a distant ruckus.

They rounded a curve on the garden path and saw a large crowd of extraordinary characters gathered near the statue of King Pastoria. Among them were many well known folk such as the Glass Cat, the Saw Horse, Jack Pumpkinhead and even, somewhat to the consternation of the Scarecrow, the Patchwork Girl.

“Scraps!” Exclaimed the Scarecrow.

Hearing her name she turned and waved at him with a huge smile exposing all of her genuine pearl teeth.

There were also many more of the animated there. Scraps held the head of the Gump. There was a bear skin rug that rippled along the ground of its own volition and what appeared to be an animate porcelain lamb. There was a large creature that looked as if it had been made of several animal hides sewn into the form of an ape and stuffed with sawdust that leaked out from

several of its seams. He was “Tom”, the scrap ape of whom more shall be said later.

Standing on an upturned box that, according to its label, once contained “Shining Emperor” brand soap, was an old wind up phonograph. This was Victor Columbia Edison, the animated talking machine. The box bore a picture of the Tin Woodman polished to a sparkling shine and holding a bar of soap. Obviously a product of Winkie country. The phonograph was hopping up and down on its spindly legs as it harangued the crowd. “...and I say, my fellow animated, I say that our mere freedom is not enough to put us on equal footing with the born for they can, if they so desire, reproduce after their own kind. Our Queen has denied us the only means available to enjoy parenthood! We need the Powder of Life, but it is outlawed and its creator has been forbidden to make more of it.”

Scraps, the Patchwork Girl spoke up.

*“Vic, I find your voice infernal’
Here in Oz our life’s eternal
Without wise Ozma’s astute orders
We would be crowded to our borders!”*

The Glass Cat voiced her agreement. “She’s right, Victor! We never die. Where do we put all these children you think we deserve to have?”

Victor responded loudly and his voice was most scratchy and unpleasant. “That’s not the point! In principal, we are not free unless we have the same powers as the born!”

Jack Pumpkinhead said, “Some of us have attained very high positions! The Tin Man became Emperor of the Winkies!”

In a sneering voice (for he could not sneer by expression, having no face to sneer with) Victor replied, “The Tin Man is not animated by the Powder of Life. He owes his existence to an entirely different and unique enchantment. He is not one of us!”

The crowd muttered amongst itself. The stuffed ape thing spoke up. “What about the Scarecrow, the former king of all of Oz?”

Victor responded, “The Scarecrow is vague at best about how he came to be alive. I do know that where he was found by Princess Dorothy is not far from the home of Doctor Pipt, but he has never offered comment on the subject.”

The Scarecrow whispered to the Wizard “Listen to him! What a Ham!”

“Yes,” said the Wizard, “I know his type. I am his type, or at least I was...a humbug!”

Victor noticed them and called out, "Well there he is now! We have a famous guest! Perhaps the Scarecrow can tell us here and now what his origin is!" Victor jumped up and down in excitement and a record rolled out of his cabinet and shattered on the pavement.

The Scarecrow walked up to Victor and picked up the largest fragment of the record off the ground. The label read;

OZOPHONIC RECORDS

Toto's Rag - by The Emerald City Syncopators.

He cried, "Aw! I liked this one! Your taste is improving, Victor. I'll see that it's replaced."

"I don't need any favors from you, Scarecrow!"

"I think you do, Vic. Ozma doesn't have to let you stay in Emerald City and you are an outcast in your native Munchkinland."

"I was an outcast from the instant I was given life. Even my "twin sister" treats me like a pariah." Victor gestured with his horn toward Scraps. She responded by sticking out her velvet tongue at him.

The Wizard asked "If your life has been so bad, why are you so intent on making more like you?"

Victor's response was almost like a growl or a sneeze made from a scratchy Sousa march. Perhaps it was his equivalent of a raspberry. "What I want is recognition that I and all of the animated have as much rights as any Ozite.

"How can we trust you to use those rights wisely?" Inquired the Wizard. "Not all of you are well balanced mentally!"

"Are all meat people 'balanced mentally?'" Victor infused the phrase "meat people" with darkest contempt.

"You have to admit that he has a point there, Oz." Said the Scarecrow.

The Wizard raised an eyebrow in his direction. "Who's side are you on, anyway?"

"I'm just saying."

Victor piped up raucously. "You see, oh Great and Powerful Oz, the Scarecrow senses that he is more one of us than one of you! He doesn't have a meat body. Why should he think meat thoughts?"

"Now just a minute!" Exclaimed the Scarecrow.

"Indeed," Said the Wizard "Just a minute!"

"I know what's right in this situation and it has nothing to do with what I'm made of! All you do, Victor, is try to stir up trouble! All you do is make

noise!” Victor stepped back as the Scarecrow took a step forward and almost tumbled off of the soapbox.

Victor blasted a snatch of cacophonous ragtime. The Scarecrow jammed his fist into Victor’s horn to muffle the awful noise. Victor went silent and the Scarecrow withdrew his hand. Victor spoke more quietly now. “Making sound is what I was made to do! I’m a talking machine and everyone has always hated me for it from the instant I became alive! Who are you to try to shut me up?!?”

The Wizard stepped up to them and said, “We have been charged by her royal majesty, Queen Ozma of Oz to explain her position on the use of magic. The use of these forces shall be restricted to those to whom she extends specific license and to no others. She cannot be any clearer on this point. The use of magic has brought this country to the brink of ruin in the past. The queen, who loves her people very much, does not wish to see this happen again.”

Victor screamed a xylophone novelty tune and said “BAH! It is all so very easy for her to say!”

“Victor,” said the Scarecrow quietly, “so far you have committed no crime against the state, but the queen can exile you from the city at any time. She has wished that we make sure that is clear to you. She dearly hopes that there shall be no more rallies.”

“You cannot silence me, Scarecrow! It is you who shall be silenced.” Said Victor darkly.

“I’m just trying to keep peace in Emerald City.” said the Scarecrow. “I have delivered the queen’s message, now we will go in peace.” The Wizard and the Scarecrow both turned and left the park.

Chapter 6

A Disappearance

I

Ozma was in her personal apartments with Dorothy playing Fopsie, a complex game originating among the Gillikins that involves cards, dice and a multi-level board who’s rules change with every turn. It is regarded as

almost impossible to learn completely and misinterpreting any rule costs a player points.

Dorothy had just moved her marker which was made from a solid ruby three spaces to land on a spot that demanded she draw a card. The card she drew informed her that she had to return her marker to its previous position and then turn the stack of cards face up and roll again. This time she moved four spaces forward and the spot she landed told her to switch positions with Ozma. Ozma drew a card that told her she could move her piece only if she correctly guessed the roll of the dice and if she did not to pick up a card. She guessed incorrectly and her card directed her to move back six spaces. "This is a frightfully frustrating game!" Lamented Dorothy.

"I know," said Ozma, "but it sharpens the mind."

"Oh my. I wonder how sharp I really want my mind to be."

Jellia Jamb entered the room. "My queen," she said, "the keeper of the royal zoo wishes to speak with you."

"Let him enter."

Jellia Jamb ushered in a short but powerful looking munchkin. His name was Fallow Pazoo. His pointed hat was very nearly as tall as the rest of him. "The keeper of the Royal Zoo, your majesty."

"Thank you for visiting me. Why do I have the pleasure of your company today?"

"Your majesty, an animal has escaped and I thought you should know. Actually, the evidence points to its having been stolen."

"Someone has stolen an animal from the zoo? Which animal?"

"It is the Woozy, your majesty. I thought there might be need to put out a public warning that there is possibly a wild animal loose in Emerald City." The Woozy was one of Oz's rarest creatures, unique in fact. It was a dog like animal whose parts are squared off so it looks rather like a number of boxes strung together.

"But the Woozy is such a good-natured creature!" Said Dorothy. "It is not as if a kalidah was on the loose."

"Yes," said the zookeeper, "but even so, he is an exotic and unique animal and not all of his habits are known."

"Thank you. I shall put the guard of the city on the lookout for the Woozy." The Fallow Pazoo took his leave. Ozma called in a guardsman and informed him about the Woozy and then thought no more of it for the rest of the day. She and Dorothy returned to their game attempting to master its Byzantine rules.

Ozma was happy enough that the city seemed to have returned to normal. She had heard of no more attempts at incitement by Victor Columbia Edison

and in fact she had heard so little of him that she wondered if he had left the city altogether.

II

That afternoon, the Scarecrow and the Wizard were walking behind the palace. The Scarecrow was still wondering about publicly discussing his origin and if it would do any good.

“The Wizard said, “It could be a very good thing if you were to reveal the secret of your birth. You would provide a much better leader for the animated than Victor.”

“I don’t think the animated need separate leadership. I think they just need to live their lives in peace as part of the general population of Oz.”

“I’m sure that is true, my friend, but before that can happen, Victor must lose whatever small following he might have.”

The two walked by the palace loading area where the deliveries required for daily business were made. There was a stack of boxes of all different sizes, colors and shapes by the wall. As the Wizard and the scarecrow walked by, one of those boxes opened a pair of eyes. A strange and scratchy voice called out the words “Krizzle-Kroo!”

Suddenly, to the Wizard’s horror, the Scarecrow erupted into a column of flames. He flailed about for a very few seconds, but quickly collapsed as his arms and legs burned off. The Wizard shouted for help. “Fire!” He shouted again and again. Two munchkins emerged from the building with buckets of water and threw them on the Scarecrow. The Wizard hung his head in grief when he saw how little was left of his friend.

III

In the audience hall, Dorothy was trying to sit straight on her small throne but was weeping inconsolably.

“How could this have happened?” asked Ozma of the Wizard.

“It was the Woozy. His captor knew that he flashed fire from his eyes when he heard the words ‘Krizzle-Kroo’. The animal has been recaptured but he can tell us nothing of his captor as he was kept blindfolded until the very moment of the assassination attempt.”

Tears welled in the queen's eyes. "Never has such a thing happened during my reign! I want the assassin captured. Bar the city gates!" She calmed slightly. What will become of the Scarecrow?"

"During his life he has had every part of his body including his brain replaced many times and yet has still maintained his identity. His brain was mostly unharmed as bran and pins burn a lot more slowly than straw. A new body is being prepared for him now. He justifiably has a terrible fear of fire. It might take him a while to get over the experience."

Hearing this, Dorothy completely broke down in tears and Ozma took her into her arms and hugged her to her bosom and stroked her head.

"I have an idea." Said the Wizard of Oz.

IV

The Scarecrow opened his eyes and screamed. "Fire! I'm on fire!"

The Wizard's face entered his field of vision and he put his hands on the Scarecrow's shoulders sitting him back into his chair. "Relax, dear friend. It's all over!"

The Scarecrow shook with terror. "I was on fire! We were just walking and talking and then I was on fire!"

"Yes you were, but you are fine now."

The Scarecrow started to get a hold of himself. He raised a hand to look at it just for reassurance. "Gadzooks!"

The Wizard said, "Please try to relax. I will explain everything."

"But I'm not *me* anymore!"

Chapter 7

India Rubber Joe

Emerald City was having a rare and sad occasion, a state funeral. The entire population of Emerald City and thousands from every part of the land of Oz as well as a few dignitaries from the lands beyond the Deserts had come to pay their respects. A great hero, a living wonder, the first ruler of united Oz after the Witches' reign of terror and beloved figure to all Ozites for over a century, the Scarecrow was gone. He had been taken away from them by an assassin.

The crowd was resplendent in the signature colors of their respective lands but all wore black armbands and black tassels on their hats as a sign of mourning.

Victor Columbia Edison stood amongst the crowd, his horn cocked in interest. “The wonder of it all,” he thought, “that burning down a haystack could have such an effect!” He turned to walk away. He didn’t need to spend any time here. Without the Scarecrow around, uniting the animated behind him should be no problem. He entered Pastoria Park and headed for the statue. He found his soap box lying under an apple pie tree. Several of the animated showed up as he had spread the word that he intended to speak this day. He had requested to speak at the funeral, but Ozma rejected the offer and Dorothy had burst into tears at the very suggestion, so he told his followers that he would speak at a separate event. All of the prominent of the animated stayed away except Bungle, the Glass Cat as a gesture to her friend. Among the rest of the group that came to listen to Victor were a Pottery Clown*, and an animate rug. There was the animal hide ape (who’s name was “Tom”) and a violin with wooden arms and legs that spoke by bowing its own strings. Victor had seen all of these beings at previous rallies and meetings, but there was a new face in the crowd. It was tall and vaguely man-shaped although his arms and legs seemed to have no joints and there was no distinct neck connecting his head to his body, rather his head rose directly from his shoulders in a rounded cone shape. He had a wide mouth and a pointed nose. His eyes looked like they might once have been large agate marbles. His entire body was made of shiny black vulcanized rubber. “This is a peculiar being,” thought Victor, “but still not as odd as myself.” Victor called out to him. “Who are you, stranger?”

“I was made without a name, but folk have taken to calling me India Rubber Joe. I was created by a Munchkin farmer as a field hand. The farmer had obtained a small quantity of the Powder of Life from a traveling trader. He made my body out of India Rubber so that I would be able to get into tight places and stretch my arms so I could reach things that were up high. I worked for him for many seasons and he treated me well enough, but I yearned to see more of life. When Ozma declared manumission of the creatures created by the Powder of Life, I decided to see the world. Now finally, I have come to Emerald City!”

**The author wishes the reader to understand that this is not the same pottery clown that appears in “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz” but another pottery clown that was animated by a Munchkin child who thought it would be wonderful if her pottery clown would come to life and, through coincidence, had some of the magic powder. The clown had a contrary nature and ran away having a fine adventure in the process, but that as they say, is another story.*

Victor nodded his horn. "And at an auspicious moment in history, for we are soon to seize our full rights as citizens. We shall stand equally side by side with other creatures and build families of our own."

There was a general murmuring of agreement from the gathered animate.

India Rubber Joe spoke up. "How will that come to pass?"

"I will force the queen to allow us to manufacture the Powder of Life without restriction. I want her to make it legal for the animate to use it but restrict it from meat beings. We shall have children, but they shall have no more slaves and talking novelties."

"How will you force the queen's hand?"

"I have started already. Her allies need to be removed so she is left exposed. We will then be able to force her to comply with our demands!"

India Rubber Joe's face seemed unreadable. His wide mouth had seemed to be bent into a permanent smile from the moment Victor had first seen him. His postures and body language were unique to himself as was the case with most of the animated. "Who have you removed?" Asked India Rubber Joe.

"One of the queen's messengers. He could have been one of us, but he chose to take the side of the oppressor."

India Rubber Joe asked, "And who will be next?"

"The queen's closest friend and confidant, the princess Dorothy. Without her, the queen's spirit will be broken."

The meeting carried on and more wicked plans were discussed before they broke up. As they were leaving the park, the last of the Scarecrow's miles long funeral procession was filing past the park gate. His ashes were being taken to a horse and rider who would carry them to the field where Dorothy found him and there they would be scattered. "Foolish sentimentalism," commented Victor. India Rubber Joe bid him farewell and walked off with a rubbery step.

As soon as India Rubber Joe was out of sight of the group, he re-entered the park through another gate and made his way to the new statue of Ozma. He pressed two rivets on the dedication plate at the same time and the plate slid aside revealing a tunnel. India Rubber Joe entered and the plate slid closed behind him.

Joe made his way along a tunnel that was lit with small electric lamps until he came to a small wire cage style elevator that he quickly entered. He thrust the lever all the way over and the elevator rose up a long shaft. Suddenly it rose through the floor of a room. Across the room sat the Wizard

of Oz. "Welcome back 'India Rubber Joe'," said the Wizard. "It was a wonderful funeral, too bad you had to miss it."

"In so very many ways I am not like ordinary people, but what I have in common with most of them is that I have no desire to witness my own burial. Can I become myself again?"

"Of course, my friend." The Wizard gestured to a chair in which a quite ordinary lifeless scarecrow slumped. "I made every effort to reproduce the original. I even found a bag from the same brand of flour to make your head out of."

India Rubber Joe walked over to the straw dummy. "It may not be much, but it's home," he said.

The Wizard indicated a second chair and India Rubber Joe sat down and Oz walked around behind him. I wish I could tell my readers that what transpired next was some sort of very scientific operation, but in fact it was very ordinary and by virtue of that ordinariness underscored just how extraordinary it was. The Wizard pulled down a short zipper on the back of India Rubber Joe's head and reached into the opening. He pulled out a small bag of bran and pins. He then removed the head of the scarecrow and untied the length of rope that held the neck closed and inserted the bag into it and then re-secured the head to the body. The Scarecrow blinked his painted eyes and then grinned. "Gosh, I'm glad that's over! I could feel myself becoming someone else when I was in that body!"

"The body dictates personality far more than most of us would care to admit. Tell me, what have you learned?"

The Scarecrow then related to the Wizard what he had heard of Victor's wicked plan concerning Dorothy and also his plan for general insurrection in Emerald City. They conversed from the afternoon into the night as to what sort of countermeasures might be employed.

Meanwhile, the abandoned body of India Rubber Joe sat slack and blank-eyed in the chair. The Scarecrow agreed to stay in the apartments of the Wizard until Victor attempted his next move. It was decided that only the Wizard, Ozma and Dorothy would know that the Scarecrow had survived for the time being.

Chapter 8

Magic lessons

While the practice of magic was illegal for most Ozites., it was still considered an important branch of learning. The Wizard taught an introductory course at the Athletic College, one of the only academic courses there that was not given with Learning Pills. Students were only allowed to participate if issued a permit by Ozma herself. Oz had considered calling off the class this week due to the “death” of the Scarecrow, but his plan hinged on things appearing to be as normal as possible, so in the end he decided to go ahead with the session.

The class was held in his laboratory which barely had room for even this small group of students. They were crammed in amongst the many tables piled with glassware and books. Over in one corner hung the large paper head that he had once used to strike fear into visitors when he ruled Emerald City. There were shelves filled with jars of all kinds of unusual materials and sitting limply on a chair was the body of India Rubber Joe which was, of course, utterly lifeless.

Today the Wizard was attempting to explain the intricacies of a seemingly simple charm. While referring to a complicated diagram on a blackboard behind him, he said;

“Magic is an interesting discipline that allows the control of entities and actions through ceremonial practices. While it is true that there is an alchemical component to most magic, the charm we shall discuss today works by incantation alone. The more inquisitive among us sometimes ask how a mere ceremony, be it an elaborate, highly choreographed ritual involving several participants and many individual spells, charms and glamours or the simple utterance of a single word, result in actions that effect the larger environment. There is much confusion on this score but I am prepared to shed some light on the actual mechanics of the process.”

The Wizard picked up a wand made from a crystal. In his other hand he held a yellow rose.

“The first and simplest example,” he continued, “is the first spell many students encounter in their formal training wherein a rose is changed from yellow to red. A wand or a crystal that has been previously set with location charm is held over the flower. To clarify the meaning of that, what makes a magic wand magic is that it has been given a sort of “signature” in time and space. It has a means of being recognized and therefore the owner can use it as a pointer for charms and spells and the various powers called upon can

correctly reference the location of the invocation. Having used the wand or crystal to identify the flower, the practitioner utters the phrase phanzelto Igniosam Gorsemiel, postanlo rudium. The flower then changes color as a rapid blush engulfs the petals until all are a deep ruby red.”

The flower performed exactly as he described to appreciative murmurs from the class.

“It’s simple, entertaining and is useful for endowing students with a bit of confidence. So what has just happened here? Quite a lot, actually. The wand has identified the flower in time and space and referenced it to the practitioner. The first part of the incantation phanzelto Igniosam Gorsemiel, is in the language of the Lower Powers used by imps that control details of everyday experience and the behaviors of the air and Earth. Collectively, they are very powerful. Individually, they are quite limited. Phanzelto Igniosam translates as attention to the defeated of Igniosam. Gorsemiel was at one time thousands of years ago, a commander of some of the forces that attempted to overrun the elemental kingdoms and make them their own. That revolt was put down by forces of the High Elementals, among them Ruggedo, the Nome king who was then known as Roquat. That revolt took place at Igniosam, the capital of the kingdom of Earth imps. Gorsemiel was sentenced to perform the most simple tasks used to maintain the seasonal changes in the fields of grass and flowers. He was also given the very lowest rank among imps so that he might be ordered about even by humans. When a human says phanzelto to him, he is obliged to serve. This illustrates the importance of familiarizing oneself with the history of the fairy worlds for that knowledge will allow the practitioner to understand which imps, fairies, spirits and other supernatural beings may be invoked and for what purposes. Postanlo rudium simply means ‘transform to red’. As long as a properly tuned wand is employed so that Gorsemiel can find what it is one wishes to be turned red, the charm will work without any trouble. Are there any questions?”

Every single hand in the room shot into the air.

The Wizard pointed to Wylie Wicker, an especially clever Quadling student. “Professor,” he asked, “What role alchemical factors or special diagrams play in more complicated spells?”

“That is a very astute question, Mister Wicker! Some of the powers addressed in using magic require certain conditions to prevail in order for their intervention to go forward. In some cases, the alchemical formulation is a payment of power, fuel if you will. In others it is a temptation, almost like a carrot on a stick before a mule or a piece of candy for a child. Diagrams, such as the pentagram or a magic square, for example create ‘traps’ in the

higher spatial dimension where the imps dwell. Such a diagram effectively fences off the area, both spatial and metaphysical, in which an imp may exert its power thus protecting the practitioner.”

The Wizard’s explanation held the class’ rapt attention.

“Can you give us an example?” Inquired Wylie Wicker.

The Wizard paused for a moment and then said, “Alright. Of course the famous Powder of Life is the subject of much controversy these days. This is a spell in which the majority of the factors that make it work are inherent in the alchemical component. One need only call upon three imps while diagramming with gestures, body, intellect and soul. No wand is required because one of the components of the powder itself locates the subject of the incantation. Once the powder is applied, the incantation is performed thusly.”

The Wizard stood on one foot and raised his left fist with the pinkie finger extended and said “Weaugh!” He then stood on the other foot and extended his right fist upward with the thumb sticking out and said “Teaugh!” With both feet on the ground he raised both hands upward, fingers spread and shouted “Peaugh!” Suddenly there was a sound of crashing and the breaking of glassware and the face of all present turned toward the noise. India Rubber Joe stood in the corner looking this way and that and most obviously quite alive. In a small voice the wizard asked no one in particular “How?” The students were clamoring with questions and making a general ruckus. India Rubber Joe was crouching in the attitude of a cornered animal. The Wizard turned to the class and said “Silence!” He then turned back to India Rubber Joe extending a hand. “Be calm. We are all friends here.” He took a step forward. India Rubber Joe backed up until he reached the wall and there he tried to flatten himself against it. It turned out that he could flatten himself quite bit. He stretched his arms out until one of them found a slightly open window and grabbed the sill. He pulled his whole body to the window and wriggled through the open space even though it was only about two inches wide and disappeared. The Wizard and the students all ran to the window which the Wizard threw all the way open and stuck his head out in time to see India Rubber Joe plummeting down many stories toward the streets of Emerald City. As he neared the ground, he rolled into a ball. His body struck the street and bounced back almost as high as the window only to fall and bounce again this time several blocks away. They saw him rise again, this time as a distant dot that landed somewhere outside the walls of the city.

The Wizard was almost in a state of shock. “How could this happen?” he muttered half under his breath. “I need to call Glinda!”

Chapter 9

The Big Bounce

Victor Columbia Edison along with the Violin, the Pottery Clown and animal hide ape who was merely named “Tom” were walking along the Yellow Brick Road outside of Emerald City. They were heading for a previously abandoned cottage that had become Victor’s headquarters when something hit the surface of the road from the sky and instantly shot back into the air before anyone could get a good look at it. The object came down some distance away this time landing on the emerald green grass and soft earth by the side of the road and rolled to a stop. The object unfolded into the shape of a man who stood up and tottered drunkenly.

“It’s India Rubber Joe!” Exclaimed Victor. “Over here, Joe!” He called with scratchy cacophony.

The rubber man turned around and eyed the strange group quizzically. There was no hint of recognition in his face. “It’s me, Victor!” Said Victor. “All that bouncing must have rattled his brains.” He said more quietly to the others.

India Rubber Joe cautiously approached them. “Do I know you peop...er...folks?”

Victor cocked his horn curiously. “I thought you would. You don’t remember us?”

India Rubber Joe rolled his marble eyes upward trying to think. “I remember the Wizard! I was afraid! I escaped!”

“The Wizard! What did he do to you?” demanded Victor.

“Hey look!” Said Tom. He pointed to an open zipper on the back of India Rubber Joe’s head. He reached over and spread the opening revealing a hollow cavity. “No Brain!”

“The Wizard took out his brain? He will stop at nothing! No doubt he was performing some sort of experiment when India Rubber Joe escaped.”

“Let me see!” Said the Pottery Clown.

Tom picked him up so he could see into the opening. “There’s something shiny in there!” Exclaimed the clown. He reached in and fumbled around.

India Rubber Joe said “Hey! That tickles! Stop i...” and suddenly, the rubber man fell slack in a heap on the ground. In the delicate porcelain hand of the clown was a shiny steel shirt pin.

“What’s this for?” Wondered the Pottery Clown.

“I don’t know, but you’d better put it back.” Said the Violin.

The Clown put the pin back into India Rubber Joe’s head and the rubber man stood right back up. Tom reached over and closed the zipper on the back of his head. “You better keep that in there.” He said.

“What happened?” Asked India Rubber Joe. “Everything is so confusing!”

“He’s a pinhead!” Said the Violin. “That little pin is his brain!”

Victor looked at India Rubber Joe. “What happened to you? You sounded pretty smart at the meeting.”

“Smart? What Meeting?” Queried Joe.

“I don’t think you’re very smart now.” Said Victor with a scratchy, distorted sigh.

“All I know is that I don’t know much!”

“That’s all right. You’re among friends now. Come with us.”

They got to the cottage and settled down to discuss the situation. Victor had wanted to plan the abduction of Princess Dorothy, but the appearance of India Rubber Joe made him think about his plans in more detail. If Oz would do this to India Rubber Joe who had not been any kind of trouble maker so far as Victor knew, what might he do to Victor or his close associates if he were to get the chance? Obviously the Wizard was far more ruthless than his reputation would lead one to believe! Victor was finding that he was actually frightened. Even though he considered his life a failure, he would far rather have it than not have it and he certainly didn’t want be surgically de-brained! As Victor discussed his plans with his cronies, India Rubber Joe minutely examined every object in the cottage.

“Look at him!” Said the Pottery Clown. “You would think today was the day he was born!”

Every so often, India Rubber Joe would roll himself into a ball and bounce around the room. “Hey, you’re pretty good at that!” Said the Violin. “Yes,” said Joe, “But watch this! I can give you a ride too!” He suddenly stretched into a big rubber sheet and wrapped himself around the Violin and bounced around the cottage with the Violin inside of him. He finally stopped and released the Violin who staggered around the room playing a dizzy jig much to the amusement of all.

“ That gives me an idea!” said Victor.

In Emerald City, Glinda had made an appearance. She suddenly came out of the south in a brilliant white sky boat drawn by four giant red ravens. She landed in the city square in front of the palace with her Quadling honor

guard. Ozma came out to greet her in person with Dorothy close behind. The three embraced fondly but Glinda's expression was serious. "The Wizard of Oz has summoned me. I must see him at once." The three went to the Wizard's lab while the honor guard stayed with the beautiful sky boat.

Oz was at a desk with at least seven books open in front of him attempting to figure out what had happened to make India Rubber Joe come to life without Doctor Pipt's powder. Ozma, Glinda and Dorothy entered without knocking because the door was ajar. At the sight of them, The Wizard sprang up from the desk and bowed deeply to Glinda. "Thank you for coming, your goodness!" As always, he was dazzled by her supernatural beauty.

Without preamble, Glinda said, "I have something to show you. From seemingly nowhere, she produced a huge book. Just then the Scarecrow entered the lab. Neither Dorothy nor Ozma had seen the scarecrow since he had been restored because he had been hiding out in the lab. Both ran to embrace him, Dorothy with tears in her eyes. Glinda held up her hand. "Friends, we must put aside pleasantries until another time. There are serious doings afoot." Ozma and Dorothy subsided.

The Scarecrow's eyes found the book that Glinda held. The Scarecrow exclaimed, "The Great Book!"

"Yes," said Glinda, "I need to book to show you all what has happened." She nodded toward the Scarecrow. "I have read how you discovered your origin in the book."

Dorothy and Ozma looked over at the Scarecrow questioningly. The Scarecrow said, "I was going to tell you. I was Doctor Pipt's first experiment with the Powder of Life. He made me forget, but I read about it in Glinda's book. It seemed like the wrong time, polit....um..."

"Politically." Helped the Wizard.

"Yes, politically. The wrong time politically to bring it up."

Ozma smiled at the Scarecrow. "You should know, Scarecrow, that it would never have made me question your loyalty. There are many of the animated who are my closest friends."

"I guess I was more afraid that Victor would somehow try to use it against me."

Glinda said. "Victor is not as subtle as all of that! It was he that stole the Woozy and tried to kill you."

"I know. He all but told me to my face!"

Glinda turned to Dorothy. "I'm afraid that you are the next one who Victor plans to eliminate"

Dorothy gasped.

“We’ll protect you, Dorothy!” Declared the Scarecrow.

“We’ll all protect you. Said Ozma.

Glinda addressed the Wizard. “What have you to say?”

Oz looked somewhat sheepish. “My plan was simple. I was going to make Victor think he had succeeded in killing the Scarecrow and then made a new body for him in secret, India Rubber Joe. In this guise, The Scarecrow could get close to Vic and discover his plans. It worked perfectly but what happened next doesn’t make any sense!”

Glinda opened the Great Book and pointed to a passage that enlarged before their eyes wherein they read of the Wizard removing the Scarecrow’s brain from India Rubber Joe and replacing it in the Scarecrow. One of the pins of the Scarecrow’s brain of pins and bran escaped and lodged itself in the rubber wall of the inside of India Rubber Joe’s head. That was of no particular account, for the Scarecrow had many pins to spare. The problem is that even that single pin carried the enchantment of the Powder of Life. It was dormant and would have caused no trouble except that The Wizard demonstrated the incantation thus endowing the body of India Rubber Joe with a life of his own! The Wizard read the passage in horror. “What are we going to do? He asked.

Glinda had a twinkle in her eye. “Scarecrow, I would like you to remain in hiding. Oz, we are going to have to make a new laboratory for you.”

“Why?” Asked the Wizard.

Chapter 10

Panic in the Palace

Victor walked alone along the Yellow brick Road toward the gates of Emerald City. Above he heard a flapping of wings. He looked up to see Glinda’s sky boat departing, but he had no idea of its significance. He blew a rude noise in the sky boat’s direction anyway.

A guard admitted him at the gate. Instead of merely going through, Victor stopped to ply the guard with many questions. Was there a big game at the Athletic College today? At what time would Ozma hold court? Was the Zoo open this morning? Etcetera.

While he asked these questions and held the guard’s attention, something bounced over the city wall unnoticed.

The object bounced several times more before it came to rest on the soft grass of the park. Unrolling like a hollow ball, India Rubber Joe released

The Pottery Clown, The Violin and Tom. All four looked a bit unsteady. The Pottery Clown said, "This is not the most comfortable mode of travel! Thank heavens I don't have a stomach to become upset!"

"Stop complaining! We are in the city and no one saw us enter!"

India Rubber Joe had snapped back into shape and was looking all about. "What a wonderful place!"

"Stop gawking!" Came a discordant order. It was from Victor who was walking up the path toward them. "Ozma holds court in a few minutes, you need to get to the palace!"

"Alright," said India Rubber Joe, "I'll get the little girl."

"You remember what to say?"

"I am a visitor from a hidden kingdom in Gillikin country come to swear allegiance to Ozma."

"Good. Now go."

India Rubber Joe walked up to the palace gate and told the doorman he wished to be presented.

Court was not busy this morning and Joe was brought before Ozma immediately.

The Wizard had told both Ozma and Dorothy about India Rubber Joe but they were obliged to believe that they were very surprised to see him. He marched into the audience hall with great confidence although he was taken with wonder at the grandeur of the place. Luckily for the sake of his supposed disguise, he was equally taken with the wonder of pretty nearly everything he beheld, as he was only a day and a half old.

Ozma asked, "Who is this who comes before me?"

"I am India Rubber Joe. I come from the hidden mountains of Vov in the Gillikin country. My king has sent me to pledge allegiance to Queen Ozma of all of Oz!"

"You are a strange being, India Rubber Joe!"

"Yes, I am unique. I owe my existence to a magic powder that my king obtained from a traveling merchant. I serve him as a valet and footman."

"Firstly I declare that you are no longer the property of your king although you may continue to serve him if that is your desire."

"Your majesty is kind and just!"

"Also, I will require no tax or tribute from your king, only an oath to provide aid when I request it, obey our laws and show no aggression to any other state, principality or kingdom of Oz, for ours is a peaceful land."

"The King of Vov will hear and obey, your majesty." India Rubber Joe bowed deeply.

Dorothy asked, “Why were you sent to us rather than a formal ambassador?”

“Excuse me,” said India Rubber Joe, “are you Princess Dorothy?”

“Yes I am.” Said Dorothy. “How did you know?”

“You are the most famous girl in Oz. Even the lands where the rule of Ozma is unknown, they tell tales of Dorothy! Princess, I was sent because I can travel very fast. In the mountains of Vov I am used frequently as a messenger because I can bounce from peak to peak with very little effort. I can even carry people. Let me show you!” With that, India Rubber Joe suddenly stretched his body wide and started to enclose Dorothy when the palace suddenly shook as if it had been hit by an earthquake. India Rubber Joe was knocked off of his feet and snapped back to his normal shape before he could enclose Dorothy and bounce away over the city wall with her as Victor had planned.

Everyone in the audience hall ran outside where paper and debris was raining down from a window many stories up the great tower of the palace. Dorothy cried out, “That is the laboratory of the Wizard! Oh I hope he isn’t hurt!”

A hand touched her shoulder and she turned around to see Oz standing there safe and sound. She threw her arms around him. The Wizard explained, “I left an alchemical formula on the flame while I went to fetch a book. The lab blew up while I was out.” He then caught the eye of India Rubber Joe who took an uncontrollable fright when he saw the Wizard, rolled himself up and bounced away over the city wall.

Victor and his accomplices were still in the park when they heard the explosion. As they turned to see what it was a piece of smoking debris came flying in their direction to land with a thump on the ground before them. It was a book. The cover was slightly singed around the edges, but otherwise it was in good condition. Just as they all gathered around to look at it, something else hit the ground and then just as quickly shot away out of the park. They recognized the second one as India Rubber Joe, although they were puzzled why he didn’t stop. He was supposed to have Dorothy with him, but it looked like he was rolled up too tightly to be carrying her. Perhaps the explosion had something to do with all of this.

Victor again looked at the book and read the cover. It said;

The Laboratory Journal of the Wizard of Oz.

Victor screamed a discordant cakewalk and said. “This is all of his secrets! Perhaps the formula for the Powder of Life is in here!”

The Violin said, "This may be quite a bit more useful than the princess."

"You have said a bow-full, my friend! We must take this out of the city right now. We'll catch up with India Rubber Joe later." The book was hidden in Victor's record cabinet and the quartet headed for the city gate.

Back at the palace, The Wizard, Ozma, Dorothy and the Scarecrow conferred in the Wizard's new and much more spacious lab. "We will now see if that little pageant paid off." Said the Wizard.

"Did India Rubber Joe recognize you?" Asked the Scarecrow.

"Yes. This was part and parcel to my plan. The next important part will come when Victor reads the book. This is where my years of experience as a humbug come in handy."

At the cottage outside the city, Victor, Tom, the Pottery Clown and the Violin were making an interesting discovery in the supposed notebook of the Wizard. They had it open to a page on a table where they all saw a diagram of India Rubber Joe, only here it was identified as a new body for the Scarecrow. There was even a diagram that showed the insertion of the Scarecrow's brain into the chest (not the head) of the rubber man.

"Good heavens!" Scratched Victor. "He is the Scarecrow! He fooled me! He fooled us all!"

As fate would have it, India Rubber Joe entered the cottage at that very instant. He said, "I couldn't get Dorothy, there was an explosion and then that terrible man!"

All of those gathered in the cottage moved toward him. "Be silent!" Crackled Victor. "Your game is up, Scarecrow!"

"What? Why did you call me that?"

"Because that is what you are! It's all in the book! The Wizard disguised you to spy on us!"

"The Wizard! He made me alright! But I don't know about any Scarecrow!"

"I won't be fooled again. Tom, get him!"

The fur-scrap ape grabbed India Rubber Joe before he could roll into a ball and forced him into a box that he then nailed shut and tied with ropes. "That should hold him, Victor." Said Tom.

In Emerald City, slogans were starting to appear painted on public buildings. "Legalize Magic!" and "Powder of Life for the Animated!" were the most typical. There was also a rude cartoon painted right on the city wall depicting Ozma as Glinda's pet.

In the Wizard's lab, the Scarecrow spoke with Ozma. "This is very bad, your majesty! I can tell you from experience, an Ozian ruler can be deposed!"

"Pish-tosh, Scarecrow! You were on the throne by chance, I rule by right!"

"So did your father." Said the Wizard.

Ozma was quiet for a second. "Forgive my momentary lack of humility. I have faced enemies from the outside, but in this case there is a growing rebellion from within!"

The Scarecrow spoke up. "I have always been here to give you council when the times have called for it, your majesty. Even if we convince Victor to stop making trouble, his ideas have already spread to the Ozite masses. So many of the animated are honored citizens and even the meat people are starting to wonder why you deny them parenthood. They are starting to wonder why you deny magic in a magic land. Your majesty, I myself am starting to wonder these same things."

Ozma looked sharply at the Scarecrow. "So Victor has gotten to you also?"

"Victor is a disagreeable character and he preaches what he does for the wrong reasons, but the heart of what he says does not lack truth."

The Wizard said, "Suppose we were to license the Powder of Life to applicants who wish to have families. We would make it here but keep its manufacture by others against the law. This would silence Victor and would also preserve the social fabric."

Ozma thought for a moment. She then called for Jellia Jamb. "Jellia, please go to Jack Pumpkinhead and tell him that I request his presence at court tomorrow."

Chapter 11

Rebellion

Victor was furious. Once he had imprisoned India Rubber Joe, he with his cronies set out into Munchkinland for the abode of Doctor Pipt, the once crooked magician. Glinda had healed his crookedness and Ozma had enjoined him to no longer practice magic. Victor had stood in that house for many years before being animated and although he had no life during that time, he still had heard much which could now be brought up in memory. The doctor was very unlikely indeed to give up his craft. Victor believed that

he would have a supply of the Powder of Life and that is what Victor needed.

It was only a few miles along the Yellow Brick Road and then another mile or so through some fields to reach the house. The cottage was as Victor remembered it and Dame Margolotte was out hanging wash. She had not changed in a hundred years. Odd colored smoke was issuing from the chimney. Indeed, the doctor was hard at work. He spoke to Tom. "Go and overpower her. Tie her up and then the rest of us shall come. Do not let her make a sound." Obediently, the ape went up behind dame Margolotte and slipped a hand over her mouth and then bound her with the clothesline and gagged her with a shirt setting her down near the laundry basket.

Victor marched into the house to find the magician working with something over a low flame. "Remember me, Doctor Pipt?" He rasped.

The now tall and straight magician whipped around at the voice. "My phonograph!"

"I do not belong to you. Haven't you heard that the queen freed all of the animated?"

"All these years. Why are you here?"

"I think you know why, doctor. I want the Powder."

"I don't have any and even if I did, why would I give it to you?"

"Look out the window." Doctor Pipt looked out the window to see Dame Margolotte bound and surrounded by Tom, The Violin and The Pottery Clown. "We have your wife."

Doctor Pipt was horrified. "You mustn't hurt her! Alright, I have a small supply." He placed three bottles of powder in Victor's cabinet. "Take it and go!"

"That wasn't so very difficult, was it?" Said Victor as he backed out of the house. "Goodbye, 'father'."

Victor headed back into the fields with the Violin and the Pottery Clown. Tom lingered behind untying Dame Margolotte only after they were out of sight. Then he too ran off.

Doctor Pipt said to Margolotte as she rubbed her wrists, "We must go to Emerald City! Something terrible is going on!"

The criminal quartet were walking up the road as quickly as they could. They had the powder, the time to strike was now. Victor intended to animate as many beings as the supply of powder would allow. The Wizard's book didn't contain the formula for the powder, but it did contain the incantation. The animated all knew at least one word of it because it was the first word they heard in their lives. Peaugh!

Back at the cottage, Victor said, “Now that we are armed with the power to make life, we can act and we can raise an army against Emerald City!”

“An army?” Asked the Pottery Clown.

“An army of the animated!”

“Good heavens!” Squeaked the Violin.

Tom merely nodded his head in agreement.

The next morning there was stirring in the woods around the cottage and then marching out of the woods, lead by Tom came great man-shaped piles of stones that had been animated with the powder. Tom had made them by laying out stones in the shape of a large person and then animating them. With the help of each previous stone man, he was able to lay out larger and larger boulders so each stone man was larger than the next. The final one was quite large enough to look over a house. Victor, Tom, the Pottery Clown and the violin put the stone men to work tearing up trees and hewing them into the shape of giant men with stone axes until there were a dozen of them. They were also animated. Victor had his army, a dozen soldiers of stone and a dozen soldiers of wood, all giants.

Victor blasted out a wavering barbershop quartet in satisfaction.

“Tomorrow morning, we take the city!”

From within the wooden box came a muffled cry from India Rubber Joe.

“Let me out!”

Victor nodded with his horn toward the box. “We’ll take that one with us to present back to his queen!”

Chapter 12

The Concession

Dorothy was worried. She had never seen Ozma so pensive. On the throne she must of course behave like a queen, but with Dorothy in private she had always been just a girl like her. Now, it seemed that there was no time for games and giggling. The queen was quiet and reserved and met with all of her prominent ministers. Finally she came to Dorothy’s apartment looking somewhat tired but determined. She embraced Dorothy but then came straight to the point. “I must legalize the Powder of Life and I must allow broader and less restricted practice of the magical arts. I must do this in order to ensure peace within the borders of Oz. Will you come with me to the Audience hall?”

Dorothy responded. "Of course! Do you really think it will ensure peace?"

Ozma shook her head sadly. "All I know is that to continue as we are will ensure rebellion."

In the audience hall were the thrones of Ozma and Dorothy as well as a third throne. The Saw Horse had been brought into the hall and all of the prominent animated of Oz were there as per her invitation as well as all of the regulars at court. Also present was the Tin Woodman, emperor of the Winkies as he was a good friend to Dorothy and Ozma. The Queen seated herself as did Dorothy and she spoke. "I would like to ask that Jack Pumpkinhead come and sit beside me." Jack stepped out of the crowd and sat on the empty throne. For the first time ever, she introduced Jack Pumpkinhead. "This is my son, Jack Pumpkinhead. Henceforth he shall be styled as a Prince of Oz." The audience applauded. Even though Jack was known to be not the very brightest of Ozites, he was known to all as a good fellow.

Ozma continued. "Our nation has come upon difficult times, times that have challenged me as a ruler. I wish to express gratitude to all for their help and loyalty and for sacrifices they have made." She gestured toward the main door and the Scarecrow entered to gasps from many of those assembled. "The attempt to destroy the Scarecrow brought home to us just how serious a problem we had. I apologize to all the citizens of this land for allowing them to believe that this beloved person was dead. It was a ruse to gain information from the rebels. I now realize that plan was misconceived and has done little to make the citizens of this land safer."

"The Wizard said. "We understand the goodness of your intentions, Your Majesty!"

"If only that understanding was universal, dear Wizard. Nonetheless, I feel the need to alter previous decisions I have made and legalize..."

A mighty **THUMP** resounded through the palace! The sound came from outside, but was felt by all through their feet almost like an earthquake.

Omby Amby rushed into the audience hall with a frightened look in his eyes. He bowed slightly and then said, "Your Majesty, the city is under attack! There are giants of stone and wood beating on the city walls!"

"We must defend the city! Call out the army!" Cried the Scarecrow.

Omby Amby said, "I *am* the army!"

"The Wizard said. "He may not be enough!"

A second **THUMP** very nearly knocked everyone in the hall off of their feet. All exited the audience chamber into the street and looked toward the city gate just in time to see the wall start to crack from another pounding.

Above the wall the heads of the tree and rock soldiers could be seen. Suddenly, a large section of the wall came down and all twenty-four of the animated giants entered the city randomly pounding buildings and stepping bushes, carts and storefronts. It would take them only a short time to reduce Emerald City to a ruin! One of the stone giants had Victor the phonograph on its shoulder and it strode toward the palace, its footsteps throwing cobblestones from the street this way and that as it did. The giant stopped before the palace steps and Victor directed the giant to throw down a box. The box hit the steps and burst open to reveal a much relieved India Rubber Joe Standing there. "Here is the Scarecrow!" Called down Victor. "I am not fooled by your spy!"

The Scarecrow stepped out from the group and said. "What do you mean? I am the Scarecrow!"

Victor honked a Caruso aria of surprise! "It's a trick!" he exclaimed.

"I *told* you that I wasn't that Scarecrow person!" Cried India Rubber Joe. India Rubber Joe and the Scarecrow looked at one another in curiosity.

"I *was* you," said the Scarecrow to India Rubber Joe, "but I'm not sure who you are now. Do you mind?" He asked as he opened the zipper on the back of India Rubber Joe's head.

"Not at all, be my guest, but please be careful, I am quite ticklish back there."

The Scarecrow peered into the opening that once had contained his own brain. "For goodness sakes!" He exclaimed.

Victor interrupted the Scarecrow's investigation. "Enough of this! Ozma, your city will be a ruin if you do not accede to my demands! I want the right to the Powder of Life for the animated!"

Dorothy shouted up to Victor. "She was going to do that this very day! You didn't have to invade the city!"

"It is true," said Ozma, "not because of any fear, but because I have come to believe that it might be the right thing to do. The animated will have the Powder. Please come down here."

Victor had the stone giant put him down and called to all of the other giants to cease their attack. He called Tom over had had him order the stone and wood giants back to the countryside.

Victor stood before Ozma with Tom, the Pottery Clown and the Violin by his side. India Rubber Joe was observing as were everyone, for none knew what the queen was about to say.

"Every living being in Oz is entitled to respect under the law. That includes those who may take issue with laws that the queen has proclaimed. It is my duty to listen to the will of my people in all things up to and

including my very right to rule. It is also my duty to enforce the laws and to protect all Ozites. You four have committed crimes. I learned yesterday that you had robbed Doctor Pipt, threatened Dame Margolotte and you have led a destructive force against Emerald City. It is also believed that you attempted to destroy the Scarecrow. Do you deny any of these things?"

Victor stood silent for a moment. Finally he said, "I cannot deny them."

Ozma said, "Then you must be punished."

"Am I to be put to death then?"

"I don't know that the spell that gave you life can be undone and besides it would be irresponsible of me as you have twenty four children."

"Children!" Squawked Victor.

"The giants. They are the children of all four of you and I charge you to raise and educate them to be good citizens. If they cause any more destruction, it is you four who shall make reparation. Your first task shall be to rebuild the walls of Emerald City. Perhaps you can educate your giants to perform that service. If you fail in this, you and your offspring shall be exiled to the lands beyond the desert."

She turned to the Wizard. "Likewise, Oz, I charge you with the education of India Rubber Joe, for he was born in your lab."

"It shall be as you say, your majesty." Said the Wizard of Oz with a deep bow.

Chapter 13

One year later

It was a fine day in Pastoria Park. The Scarecrow and the Patchwork Girl sat on a bench holding hands and merely enjoying one another's company as they watched four small rag dolls at play nearby. They had not long resisted the urge to create a family, built more in the image of their mother than their father, but the two boys wore a munchkin hat similar to that worn by the Scarecrow and all of the children had his wise smile.

The two could also see from their bench outside the park where a new building was going up. The work crew consisted of four giants, two of stone and two of wood and the work proceeded quickly as they required no machines to lift great beams and stones into place. The Woodstone brothers, as they had come to be known, were now of indispensable service in Emerald City. Once they had been put into a business of their own and had

proven to be good citizens, Ozma had released the four animated agitators from their sentence. Victor was extensively repaired, his cabinet refinished and relieved of all warping and he was given a new shining steel needle and a shining new brass horn. The sounds that came forth from him were now far sweeter. He returned to the abode of Doctor Pipt where he served willingly as a phonograph restricting his speech to suggestions for the next record. The Pottery Clown and Tom the scrap ape became ordinary Ozites and caused no strife. The Violin became the first violin in the Royal Orchestra of Oz becoming quite famous as both musician and instrument.

Across the park, Ozma and Dorothy were engaged in a spirited game of badminton observed and encouraged by various member of the royal court with the Cowardly Lion officiating and keeping score.

Back at the palace, Oz was at work teaching a new class of magical practitioners in his expanded lab. India Rubber Joe served him ably as a teaching assistant. The Wizard had made him a brain from a bag of emeralds that his thoughts might sparkle.

Glinda sat in her palace in the heart of Quadling Country and turned another page in the great book of Oz.

The End

I just wanted to write a story about someone with unusual talents. I composed this purposely to be commercial and saleable. No takers yet, so I guess it was a miss rather than a hit.

Being Remarkable

O.k., let's start with the basics. I'm not *the* anything. I'm just Remarkable Bob. Frequently, when I used to play gigs, I got introduced as *the* Remarkable Bob and it really kind of pissed me off. There is no *the*. I did close up magic...intimate stuff. Small illusions. My act did *not* include sawing ladies in half, walking through walls or making the *effing* Statue of Liberty disappear. Don't ask me to pull a rabbit out of a hat. Just don't, o.k.?

My venue was not the stage of a theater or halftime at a football game. I worked parties, usually in the best neighborhoods. People hired me because of word of mouth and I got top dollar so I only had to play ten to fifteen gigs a year although some of them were whole weekends. I was good. I was *damn* good. I was also a total fraud.

Don't get me wrong, I'm well aware that all magicians are frauds, hell fraud is the *definition* of stage illusion. I know this, but trust me when I tell you, I was a fraud. The unspoken deal between a magician and his audience is that they come to him to be entertained by him fooling them into thinking they see something happening that is not in fact happening. He fools them, they love being fooled, everybody happy. Not so with me. I didn't provide illusions. I provided realities that the rational minds of my audience *perceived* as illusions because their experience permitted them to do nothing else. The truth is, I know nothing of the art of the illusionist, space-time is simply my bitch.

I'm not sure when I figured out that I was a bit different. Not all of my special abilities became apparent until I was in early adulthood, but some of it was obvious from when I was an infant. I can be very strong. I have normal strength most of the time, but if I focus I can do stuff like lift hundreds of pounds or bend steel bars. That one has always been with me. I can move very fast. It's not like I run real fast, it's more like everything else slows down. I just sort of shift gears and other people and things are moving very slowly. I don't need to run, I can just walk around normally and to them I can seem to be just like something swiftly buzzing around them or even completely invisible. I have been able to do that since I was about ten. When I hit puberty, I discovered I could fly, well, sort of fly. I don't flap my arms or anything, I just kind of glide around. I guess it's more like levitating. I

can make other things levitate too, by the way and manipulate them as if they were in my hands. When I was eighteen, I started making things disappear and reappear. I could just put them into a different kind of space. I don't know the scientific explanation for it. I have always had a bit of a fear of doctors and scientists, a vague feeling that if I let them get their hands on me they might never let me go.

I don't know why I'm the way I am. I'm pretty sure that I wasn't sent from a dying planet in a tiny rocket, but that's about the only thing I've ruled out. Enchanted by pixies is still in the running. Of course, the fact that my parents both worked in chemical research and they both died in their forties from cancer caused by exposure to God-knows-what might have something to do with it. Maybe something that they worked on affected their genes. I'll never know because all of their work involved trade secrets for the company that employed them. They died within a year of one another, Dad first, when I was nine and I went to live with an aunt, my mother's younger sister Donna in Boston.

The loss of my parents was horrible, I barely was aware of anything except my personal pain for months. I did some acting out and that's how Aunt Donna found out how strong I could be. I threw a bit of a tantrum and punched a hole in the refrigerator. I was sorry and wouldn't stop crying because I was afraid she would punish me. My parents had just told me that doing things like that would get them hurt. If anybody saw me be real strong, they would get in *big* trouble. I told all of this to Aunt Donna and she agreed that it was best that I not do things like that. She was the first person to show me comic books about people who could do amazing things, but they always hid that they could do them or people would want them to do them all the time or worse, hurt the people they loved.

Aunt Donna was a young woman when I first came to live with her and she lived with her best friend, Tracy who was a painter. Although Donna was young and vibrant, she never dated men or ever talked about getting married. It took me a while, but I eventually realized that she and Tracy were sort of married to each other. At that age, I didn't know the word "lesbian", but I got the general idea.

Aunt Donna loved all her friends in the city but thought I might have some rather special growing pains that would be best experienced somewhere with a lower population so we all moved to a farm in Vermont. Aunt Donna raised vegetables and wrote articles for magazines and Aunt Tracy started painting big pictures which she sold for a lot of money out of a gallery in New York City.

As farms go, it wasn't big and it certainly wasn't a working farm except for Aunt Donna's garden which got bigger every year, so most of the land was left to go wild. I spent a lot of days just running and playing with our four dogs. Before too long I could outrun them. The speed thing was not what you might expect (as if you might expect anything of the kind) as I only noticed it at first when I was running. That was because I *wanted* to go fast. I discovered that if I *wanted* to go fast, even when I was standing still, everything around me would go slow, sometimes *very* slow. It was like I could stop the world and step away from it. I don't know why, but I didn't tell aunts Donna and Tracy about it right away. My strength already caused Aunt Donna a lot of worry, especially when I was at school and she couldn't keep an eye on me. Once they had a friend over, a guy named Ron who could do a few magic tricks. He could make small objects disappear and pull a coin out of my ear. Dumb shit like that. He had just done a thing where he had made a dollar bill vanish. He used one of those fake thumb tip deals to do it cramming it down into his fist with his thumb and then showing both hands empty. He did it well and I didn't spot the thumb tip gimmick so I hadn't figured out how it was done.

"How did you do that?!" I demanded.

"The first rule of magic is that a magician *never* tells how a trick is done."

I guess I was at a bratty age, but I had to show him up. I said "I can do that!"

"Oh, you can? Show me." He handed me a dollar. I folded it in half and closed my hands around it, then I went *fast*. I just put the bill in his breast pocket and then leaned back, put my hands back together and slowed down again. I opened my hands and, of course, no dollar bill could be seen.

"Where did it go?" he asked. He seemed to be impressed.

I pointed to his pocket. "Right there." He pulled it out and looked at it.

"Wow! How did you do that?"

"I thought you weren't supposed to tell." I had him there, but he looked at me strangely the whole rest of the time he was there, but not as strangely as Aunt Donna.

After Ron went home, she got me to fess up and suddenly I was being home schooled. I was simply going to attract too much attention before she trained me to be discrete with my abilities. I discovered that doing "magic" was a good way for me to use my abilities without people thinking it strange. I was unschooled in stage magic so I didn't do anything in a standard way. I did a trick of making a quarter that a volunteer spins on a tabletop turn into a Susan B. Anthony dollar (almost the same as the dollar trick I just switch the coins at *fast* speed) and a thing where I crushed an aluminum can between

my hands and made it vanish. The can trick was done by literally getting *strong*, crushing it flat between my hands and then going *fast* to roll the metal to the size of a marble and pocket it before showing my empty hands. I did both of these for a stage magician once when I was twelve and I was amazed at how startled by them he was. He couldn't see me using any misdirection or gimmicks and the "illusion" was perfect even though my showmanship was obviously amateurish. He just went on and on about how original the illusion was and kept hinting that he would really like to know the secret and how it was all right to tell a fellow magician. After that, I never knowingly performed for a magician and I have never joined any of the professional conjurer's organizations. I was an outsider in my own profession.

I'm not that good with cards and don't do many things with them. I learned a few standard card tricks just for fun, but the fact is, I just don't have the manual dexterity to do those fancy shuffles and fans that people like so much and I didn't have incentive to practice them because the other stuff was impressive and so easy for me. I wasn't *really* a magician. Like I said earlier, I was a fraud.

I really was starting to read comic books in earnest at this point and was beginning to think that maybe I could do some good in the world with my abilities. When I told this to the aunts they were horrified. Aunt Donna pointed out that a lot of people out there didn't care if I got hurt or even killed and the police didn't want help from vigilantes. Aunt Tracy was even more vehement saying that the cops were just pigs anyway and didn't deserve my help in keeping the common people down. Besides, what did I want to do, save damsels in distress? She went on and on about how women were perfectly capable of taking care of themselves and so on. It's a whole *thing* with her. She said that the world doesn't need a super-strong macho guy to take care of it.

I believe that a lot of her thinking was influenced by the odd behavior of Mr. D. All the macho posturing and "I pity the fool" stuff. Still he was the world's single bona fide superhero that exists outside of the world of comic books. He legally changed his name to Mr. D "so people would *have* to call me Mr.!" Once upon a time he was a soldier and former football player named Laurence Davis. He refuses to talk about it, but something happened during his time in the Army that caused him to gain super strength that has grown year by year ever since. At first he was just very strong, but within human limits. He won a couple of *world's toughest bouncer* competitions in Las Vegas, did some acting and briefly entered the world of professional wrestling. It was there that people first started to see that his strength was out

of the ordinary. Pro wrestling is so full of stage effects and hyperbole that when he tossed Hulk Hogan twelve feet in the air and caught him again to celebrate a tag-team victory, most people assumed that it was somehow staged. They were less skeptical when he lifted a limousine on the David Letterman show. He soon realized his real calling and took to defending the streets of his native Chicago. He is a striking figure, no doubt about that. With his growing collection of gold chains (“I believe in the *golden rule*, he that has the gold makes the rules!) and distinctive haircut he strikes fear into the hearts of Chicagoland’s drug dealers and organized crime. Unfortunately he tends to bull his way through situations usually causing disproportionate amounts of damage in stopping crimes. Once when a gunman entered a bank, he stopped him by bringing down part of the building on him. On another occasion he chased a purse snatcher down the street while flipping over parked cars that were in his way. He was once charged with manslaughter for attempting to teach a mugger a “lesson” by throwing him over a hundred feet into the air and catching him. The mugger suffered a fatal heart attack, but a Chicago jury refused to convict their resident superhero. More recently, there have been several instances where he has created large amounts of chaos pursuing alleged terrorists, not one of whom was ever discovered to be connected with a known terrorist organization or linked to any particular terrorist act. He has been sued many times and has not always prevailed in those cases. Luckily for him, he has a foundation built on private contributions to support his activities. Chicago talk show host, media tycoon and richest woman in America, Moriah Paley made a single contribution to that foundation of sixty million dollars in 2000, doubling Mr. D’s available assets. That month, he appeared beside her on the cover of “M” magazine. He has also amassed a huge personal fortune from endorsements and still occasionally acts. Mr. D is one of Aunt Tracy’s least favorite people. She regards him as gross, ham-handed and generally offensive. Aunt Tracy, while not straight-laced by any means, was still not generally prone to profanity, but in regards to Mr. D, I would sometimes hear the word “fucktard” escape her lips. Neither of the aunts wanted to see me become like Mr. D. It upset them so much that I never brought it up again.

When I got to be about fourteen I discovered that girls were suddenly both wonderful and scary and I also discovered myself and spent a lot of time alone much to the amusement of the aunts. During that period I found that I would lift off of the ground while lost in self pleasure. Release would precipitate me back onto my bed, sometimes from a height of four or five feet. At first I thought that masturbation was required to do the trick but I

soon learned that I didn't need to be aroused to do it. Again, I kept the new ability to myself while I learned to use it. I would go out into the woods out of sight of the house and spend time gliding among the trees while the dogs watched in bewilderment. One day I went *fast* while doing it and tried to fly to Boston. I got lost and it took me many subjective hours to get back home only a few objective minutes later. Going *fast* for that long took a lot of energy and I ate like a hungry wolf at dinner that night. The next time I tried that I took a map which tore apart in my hands right away. Even if it didn't feel super fast to me, I was still exposing the paper to tornado air speeds. My clothes also got sort of torn up when I did that. Flying long distance at high speed just didn't feel practical.

I discovered that I could levitate things other than myself. I terrified the dogs by doing it to them, but it made them so skittish, that I stopped. I discovered over time that I could lift weights by levitation as great as those I could physically. At that age it was about the weight of a small car. These days I can hoist a few of tons but if I do, it knocks the stuffing out of me and I have to sleep pretty soon thereafter. Energy doesn't come for free.

I really wanted to go to public school where I could meet other kids (read *girls*) so I really worked hard to keep the Aunts from finding out about the levitating. I never did it in the house except a little bit in my room when no one could see me. After the first few times, it was never a feature of my auto-erotic activities.

Constantly needling the aunts finally got results and I entered public high school as a freshman. I had to make a deal with them that involved not getting involved with sports and never *ever* fighting. They told me that if they found out about me fighting, even once, even if I didn't start it, I would be right back being home schooled. With my strength, they thought it would be easy for me to lose control and hurt or kill someone. As a result of this bargain, I have never picked up even the most elementary of fighting skills. Obviously, I can defend myself if attacked because of my strength, but it looks weird and awkward. I'm not built like Schwarzenegger or anything close to that, my strength does not come from muscular development. It is something else altogether. I am well developed, but lean, just this side of skinny. More the build of a marathon runner than a weight lifter.

I worked hard to get along with people. My magic tricks went a long way toward that. High school is where I learned that small tricks were better than big tricks because even really amazing things were acceptable as mere magic tricks on a small scale. Making a coin float a few inches above a lunch table was easier to dismiss as a harmless trick than making a car float a few inches above the parking lot or making myself seem to vanish by going *fast*. That

last I did once to get out of a confrontation with a bully, but we were alone and he never told anyone about it so far as I know. He also never bothered me again.

Because I received good grades in science and math and that my hobby was magic, I was technically something of a nerd, but I still managed a certain amount of personal popularity. I had a number of friends, including girls. One very special girl was Dana Parrish. Dark and pretty, Dana wanted to become an actress. She saw a connection between us because we both showed interest in the performing arts. She became the first girl I ever kissed and afterward she was almost all I could think about. For the last quarter of freshman year, I spent all of my free time with her. I remember her slightly cinnamon fragrance to this very day.

I didn't see Dana over the summer because her parents sent her to summer camp and when sophomore year started she broke my heart by telling me she had met another guy at camp who she was writing to twice a week. As far as I was concerned at the time, my life was pretty much over. I dreamed of finding this guy who had stolen the affections of my sweet Dana and beat him to a stain with all of my strength. I wondered if I could levitate him high enough into the atmosphere that he would suffocate from lack of oxygen or simply drop him into the middle of the ocean. I came to realize that this boy, whoever he was, was innocent, that it was Dana who had betrayed me. I set about plotting some sort of revenge. I couldn't bring myself to physically hurt her, but surely I could humiliate her as I felt she had humiliated me. I came very close to carrying out a plan to go *fast* so no one would see me and strip her naked in the cafeteria at lunch time. It was just the thought that word of the deed would get back to my aunts that stopped me. What also stopped me was that I started spending time with Emmy, a friend of Dana's who thought it was just terrible what had happened between us. Pretty soon, Dana didn't seem to matter as much.

And so I continued to have as normal a High School career as possible for a boy with extraordinary abilities being raised by lesbians. I was always acutely aware, and that awareness was re-enforced by my aunts, that I could carry out many of the things that ordinary people only dream of and that I must be careful to always control myself and never act impulsively. This led me into one of the weirdest conversations of my life.

In my junior year, I was dating a girl named Shannon who was showing all signs of being amenable to surrendering her chastity. We had gotten into some pretty heavy breathing and heavier petting lately and I knew we were on the brink of closing the deal. This time comes in every young man's life. It is a typical rite of passage, except that most young men are not trained to

discuss any major physical happening in their lives with their aunts. Both Aunt Donna and Aunt Tracy had bad experiences with boys in their teens before they discovered that they were more interested in other girls. They both assaulted me with a lengthy list of “don’ts”, most of which seemed to originate with very painful personal events from their own history. They were, of course concerned that I keep control of my hyper-normal strength during the heat of passion, which was a concern I shared and was prepared to be careful about. Of course condoms were mentioned...about thirty-thousand times. I was forced to beg out of the discussion when they both started giving me *very* specific advice about techniques that I was uncomfortable hearing about from my aunts. I was still a little uncomfortable reading about them in dirty magazines at that point in my life.

Ultimately, nature took its course for me and Shannon and everything went fine...better than fine, great...really very, very good. I ended up staying with her until we went to different colleges and lost touch.

I went to Emerson in Boston to study theatrical arts. I had decided that I wanted to become a professional magician so I needed to learn some stagecraft.

When I went to college, I made a few transitions. One of them was that I stopped calling myself “Bobby” and became “Bob”. I started performing on weekends, kid’s parties mostly, as “Mister Amazing”, but my lack of rapport with children and the lack of color and flash in my act gained me only limited success. Kids didn’t really “get” what was special about my act. Randy, my room mate was studying drama and helped me write some comedy patter and I got myself booked in a comedy club as “Remarkable Bob” who I have been ever since. It didn’t take me long to realize that the small “illusions” that I favored played better to a smaller audience. I made a few connections and started working parties, which is what I have been doing the last seven years. Almost by accident Remarkable Bob became my personal nickname as well as my professional moniker. When my friends and acquaintances referred to me it wasn’t as Bob Winters, it was as Remarkable Bob. Even my professors started calling me that. It was one of those things that started out as a joke and just kind of got its own momentum.

That was around the time things started disappearing out of my dorm room. I had noticed how some things, mostly stuff I wanted to get rid of anyway, just seemed to not be around. I would ask Randy and he would say that he thought I had thrown them out. When I finally saw it happen with my own eyes, I thought I was going to throw up. I awoke a morning after a long night and saw a Chinese food container sitting on my desk across the room

and thought, “Got to get rid of that.” With a soft popping sound, it ceased to exist. I sat up and stared with my mouth hanging open. I tried to organize my thoughts. My life has been a long series of unexpected revelations. “I can deal with this.”, I murmured under my breath. Then a thought occurred to me. “Actually, I think I’ll keep it.” I said. The container was back on my desk, rancid duck-sauce odor and all.

Then I heard a voice. “How did you do that?” Randy was awake. He sat up in bed and again said, “How the *fuck* did you do it? You just woke up, lying in bed, no preparation and you did that!”

“Ummm...a magician never tells.” I said lamely.

“Not this time, buddy. Come on, it’s me. What’s up?”

“The short answer is ‘I don’t know’.”

“Yeah? What’s the long answer?” I ended up telling him everything, spilling my guts, the strength, the speed, the levitation and now this...whatever the hell this was. Even my aunts didn’t know about the levitation and I had never done the vanish thing until that morning. I demonstrated my abilities to him and showed how they worked in my magic. “You’re not a magician! You’re a ...”

“No! No I’m not.”

“Yes you are! You’re a superhero!”

“That’s so stupid. The world doesn’t need a super-strong baby-sitter.”

“Are you kidding me? Have you taken a look at the world lately?”

“And you think one person, no matter how powerful can make a difference? I could help more by running for president than flying around saving ‘damsels in distress’!” Randy eyed me speculatively. “And I’m not going to do that either.”, I snapped. The aunts had done a real good job of making sure I never entertained *that* idea ever again.

Anyway, it felt good to be able to share my secret with someone. The way Aunts Donna and Tracy had treated the whole thing made it feel almost dirty, but Randy thought it was just way cool.

I played around with the vanish thing and it turned out to be some sort of access to a hole in space. I could teleport things if I knew exactly where it was going, but I had to really know or I would never see the thing again. It wasn’t something I was going to try on a person real soon. I used it for getting rid of garbage by visualizing the exact position of the dumpster in back of the building.

I dropped out of Emerson halfway through my sophomore year as the magic thing was starting to take off for me. Remarkable Bob was in demand for parties. I got an apartment in Somerville and Randy moved off campus to split the rent with me. The aunts were slightly pissed that I just blew off

school, but I was making a living in my chosen profession, so they could only say so much.

I took to wearing a black T-shirt with a picture of a magic wand everywhere I went. By this time, I had a whole routine. I would hit a party and go around to small groups of people and do a trick or two, engage in a little small talk and move on to another group. I had modified the quarter into dollar trick into something pretty amazing looking. I apparently never touched any of the coins. I would ask a person to use one of their own coins and tell them how to spin it on a table top. Once it is spinning I would hold my hand about a foot above it and levitate the spinning coin about six inches off the surface. Suddenly the quarter turns into a shower of twenty-five pennies. It was a jaw dropper. Of course, no other magician has ever reproduced the trick. Well, a couple have *tried*.

For a short time I was experimenting with a kind of mentalism where I would tell people about themselves. This was accomplished by simply going *fast* and borrowing the subject's wallet. I tore pants pockets a couple of times doing this, so I gave it up.

I did a thing with a length of chain where I would cause all the links to separate without breaking them, then put the chain back together in different ways. First as a ring, then as two intersecting rings, then restored to its original length. At each transition, I allowed members of my audience examine the chain as minutely as they wanted. This was done with my new vanishing ability that I had gotten good enough with to isolate a single link.

Word was getting around about me in the professional magic community and without my knowledge several magicians had been at parties where I had performed. One of them managed to reproduce the quarter into pennies. I have no idea how he did it, but I saw him perform it once. He did it on a stage, not surrounded by people like I did, he spun the quarter himself. It was pretty impressive, particularly to me because I knew he couldn't have done it the way I did. I was worried that eventually all of my "illusions" would be recreated as stage magic and that worry led me to some bad decisions. I came up with a few tricks that were so uncanny that they aroused suspicions. I made a man's wristwatch vanish off of his wrist while he watched and then appear floating in the air before him. I made the liquid in a mixed drink rise out of the glass and float like a pulsing, amoeboid blob of alcohol and ice. These illusions required a more than ordinary suspension of disbelief and I could see some members of my audience looking at me with a tinge of superstitious fear.

Randy warned me about getting too flashy with my tricks. He was concerned about protecting what he insisted as referring to as my "secret

identity”. At that point, I was having a hard time seeing any danger in it. Wasn’t it the definition of a good magician that no one could figure out his illusions? I just was flush with my success. I didn’t realize that the central illusion of my life was on the brink of collapse.

The summer after I dropped out, Randy decided not to return to school and became my manager. The understanding was that I would continue to work private parties, but he got me a few conventions as well. He managed to set up a series of appearances in New York City over a period of a week. This was going to be my introduction to the world outside of Boston.

I did a party at a big house in East Hampton. My stuff impressed a lot of people and Randy gave out our card left and right. The next night I was supposed to do a cocktail hour for some executive meeting in Manhattan. I didn’t end up making it.

On the morning that changed everything, we were in a rental car on the Brooklyn Bridge returning from the Hamptons. Randy was driving, I was taking in the sights and then I saw the plane. It was a DC-10 and something didn’t look right. It was too low and the downward angle was too sharp. I followed its path forward with my eyes and stopped when I saw what was in its way.

“Shit! Randy! Look, the statue!”

Randy looked and saw what I saw. Lady Liberty was right in the flight path.

I didn’t have time to use judgment, good or bad, I had to act. “Pull over! Pull over!”

“Pull over? On the bridge? Where?”

No time. I got strong, reached up and punched through the sun roof, got *fast* and flew out the hole. I don’t know what I thought I was going to do. I had never even tried to shift a mass as great as that plane. Did I really think I was Superman? Had I gotten that stupid? Apparently yes to both.

I decided to get under the nose of the plane and try to push up. At this point the plane looked to me like it was moving at a walking pace. Everything else looked like it was at a dead stop so I had several subjective minutes to figure this out before everyone on the plane was killed and a great national monument was destroyed. I was slowly able to get the nose up enough so that the plane could ditch in the harbor perhaps without too much loss of life if I could slow it down enough. The problem was that the statue was still in the way and now we were only a couple of hundred feet from it. I had to take a gigantic chance. I figured that if I didn’t, the statue would be gone anyway. I made Bartholdi’s colossus vanish into that mysterious place that I prayed was big enough to hold it as the plane swept through the space

it once occupied. I looked down on the gigantic, but now unoccupied pedestal in wonder. What had I done? I pushed against the nose of the plane. This was as *strong* as I had ever tried to get. I was surprised that it was working. I strained, but didn't break a sweat. My strength doesn't seem to originate in my muscles so much as it does in some sort of force that I control. I wish I could express it more clearly, but whether it was of the body or of the mind, today it was *powerful*. Some of the metal actually crumpled under the force, but I could feel that I was having an effect. As we cleared the pedestal, now only about a hundred feet up, I called back the statue and suddenly, there she stood once more. Take *that* David Copperfield. My energy was waning and I had to stop going *fast*. I concentrated all of my power on as much strength as I could muster. I think I had the plane under a hundred miles per hour when we hit the harbor. The angle was reasonably horizontal and the plane stayed in one piece. It kicked up a mighty wake but slowed down pretty quickly and, to my relief, stayed afloat.

Just before we made contact I flew up to the top of the plane. There was already a news helicopter approaching. As I stood there trying to figure out what to do next the doors of the plane popped open and rubber chutes came out. I kind of expected to see the crew helping the passengers into life rafts, but instead there was just two people standing in one of the doors a guy holding a flight attendant close to him and a gun to her head. I zipped down to the level of the door and hung in the air about ten feet away. The gunman's eyes got big, but he stood his ground. "We want free passage out of United States!"

"Are you freaking kidding me?" I went *fast*. I took the gun away from the guy and dragged him after me as I entered the plane. Hijackers! I was pissed. They were probably planning on flying the plane into the Statue of Liberty on purpose! There were two other guys in the cabin with guns. I grabbed them too. I tied up all three with ripped out seat belts and headed for the cockpit. The pilot and the copilot had both been shot, a bullet in the back of the head each. The sight of them made me queasy. The guy who had been piloting the plane in their place had struck his head on the controls when the plane ditched and was out cold. I took his gun and slowed down. Suddenly there was action all around me as everyone was talking and gawking at the tied up hijackers. I stopped at the galley and started stuffing my mouth with cookies. I was cursing because they were all individually wrapped in pairs and I had to stop to rip the wrappers off. I was so hungry! I walked into the passenger cabin and shouted spitting crumbs everywhere. "Please calm down! Help is on the way!"

The attendant who had been being held at gun-point came up to me. “You floated in the air and then the terrorists were all tied up! How did you do that? Who are you?”

“I’m Remarkable Bob.” It came out a bit mushy because still chewing a mouth full of cookies.

“Did you say ‘Remarkable Bob’? You are a...um...super-hero?”

“You know, we really don’t have time to talk just now. They will have rescue vehicles here soon.” I looked out the window and saw Coast Guard and fire boats approaching. “I don’t know exactly what happened here, but you probably need to explain it to those guys.” Before she could say anything, I picked her up and flew out the door with her and put her down on the deck of one of the coast guard boats. I flew off as some crewmen approached. I really didn’t want to answer a lot of questions. At that moment, my cell phone rang. I flipped it open expecting it to be Randy. The voice belonged to Aunt Tracy. Uh-oh.

“What the *Hell* do you think you are doing?”

“Hey Aunt Tracy! What’s up?”

“Don’t you ‘what’s up’ me! What the hell are you doing?!? When did you learn to fly? Do you realize you’re on TV? Your Aunt Donna is *freaking out*! What the hell are you thinking?”

“Aunt Tracy, I would *love* to talk, but I have damsels in distress to rescue.” I snapped the phone shut. I was going to pay for that, but I couldn’t resist. The fact is the situation was making me slightly giddy. I felt like I was doing something useful for a change.

Pretty soon all kinds of civil and military authorities were at the plane. They started firing non-stop questions at me and I just wasn’t in the mood. I flew away. I spotted a Dunkin’ Donuts in Manhattan and dropped down to the sidewalk. I put away two dozen donuts and several cups of sweet coffee before I started to feel a bit normal.

I took a cab back to the hotel and fell into bed.

I only got to sleep an hour before I woke up to Randy shaking me. “Dude! That was incredible!” He was holding up an Extra edition of the Daily News that had a picture of me flying with the flight attendant in my arms. I gotta say, I really *looked* like a superhero. The huge black letters of the headline screamed **REMARKABLE BOB!!!** I was in for some serious shit from the aunts.

“They got my name from the stewardess?”

“And from me. After all, I *am* your manager!”

“Oh God.”, I said in a small voice. “They’re going to know all about the magic. I’ll have to get a real job.”

“You dumbass. You don’t think people will pay to see what you can do?”

“You expect me to be a superhero for hire?” This was surreal and I was still groggy. My clothes still smelled like the harbor. I sat up and pulled them off and stumbled into the shower. Randy was still babbling at me as he followed me into the bathroom.

“Dude, don’t you get it? The super heroic stuff is free, but movies and TV appearances are another thing.”

“Haven’t you ever heard of privacy?”

“Oh right! I’m in here just to catch a glimpse of your fantastic bod! For a superhero, you’re pretty skinny, ya know.”

“*Get out!*”

He got out but was still talking even though I had ceased listening. The hot water was reviving me, but I really needed more sleep and I was still hungry!

When I got out I said, “Do you think we could go for sandwiches?”

“We’ll get room service.”

“Kind of more than I want to pay.”

Randy held up a check. “We have our expenses covered. You’re doing the Today Show tomorrow.”

“What about the cocktail hour thing?”

“Cancelled. You’re not a magician anymore.”

“*What?* I’m screwed! That was a two-thousand dollar gig!”

“Get serious, Bob. You just revealed how the tricks are done! It’s time for a new act.”

So we sent for sandwiches. In the hour and a half since the plane went down, Randy had given four interviews and provided my headshot to anyone who asked for it. I was sick to my stomach, but not so sick that I stopped eating. I asked Randy between bites, “So who were those guys, the hijackers?”

“They’re not really cooperating. The FBI thinks they are poseurs, Al Qaeda wannabees. They plotted to have their own little 9/11. They were out to bring down the Statue of Liberty. They all have Canadian passports and are all of Egyptian heritage. They were going to kill all of those people and destroy the statue. You saved them. Those people are alive and the bad guys are going to jail because of you. My god! You’re eating like a pig.”

“The power to fly, lift airplanes and move giant statues doesn’t just happen. It’s not really magic, it takes calories, lots of ‘em. I’ve never tried to do this kind of stuff before.”

“Hey, one of the reporters wanted to know, Can bullets hurt you?”

I stopped and swallowed. “I don’t know and I don’t want to find out! Maybe not when I’m *strong* and I can probably dodge them when I’m *fast* but it’s not something I’m eager to experiment with.”

“Well, you had better learn your limits.”

“You are talking like you think I really intend to do this.”

“You don’t have a choice. From the second you jumped out of that car, you were never going to be plain old Bob Winters again.”

I frowned. “I’m going to need a utility belt full of candy bars.”

“Some sort of sports energy bar would be a better choice nutrition wise. Pick the one you like and endorse it and you’ll have all you need for free.”

That night, I saw the TV footage that was taken of me at the crash site. Amateur video showed the disappearance and reappearance of the statue as the plane swooped over Liberty Island. I was a barely visible speck on the nose. There was video taken by the news crew and the Coast Guard showing me popping in and out of sight as I went *fast* and slowed down, and a shot of me flying with the stewardess in my arms. Shit! I was a superhero!

So I did the Today Show and just about every other show. I didn’t divulge my real name and, to my surprise, it took about a week before it came out in the press. The Army showed an interest in me until they got wind of my politics and the “alternative relationship” of my aunts. I got a phone call from the Attorney General of the United States in which he gave me a lengthy lecture about the sorts of things that I shouldn’t do as a private citizen. Mostly, he was concerned that I didn’t involve myself in *investigating* crime. It was perfectly acceptable for a private citizen to stop a crime or help at the scene of a disaster, but I was not a law officer. He made it clear that I could be made into some sort of agent and would then be responsible to the government, an offer I politely declined.

I went to Vermont to explain things to Aunts Donna and Tracy. They were both furious with me while being a bit proud at the same time. Aunt Donna actually suggested that I change my name and try to maintain a secret identity. I don’t think I could have made that work. Randy had made a similar suggestion. He thought I should get my name legally changed to Remarkable Bob! That’s a laugh, would I then be addressed as “Mr. Bob”?

Eventually, the aunts forgave me. Aunt Tracy told me I’d better not start acting like a fascist enforcer of the patriarchy and Aunt Donna just wanted me to get a bullet proof vest...and pants...and helmet. It would take a suit of armor to make her happy.

My life is different now, but at least I’m not pretending to be something I’m not. Frankly, I’m surprised that no one who hired me as a magician has ever tried to sue me for misrepresenting myself. I know that even with great

power, I can't fix everything. I don't patrol or go looking for trouble, but I can help out here and there and I'm happy to do it. I have gotten supplies into and people out of disaster areas. I have stopped a number of crimes before they happened and even prevented another air crash. I tried to stop a war once and got a missile shot at me for my trouble. I barely outran it. After that I kept my politics to making speeches and endorsing candidates.

Wearing a space suit, I carried emergency supplies to the space station. I ended up making a second trip because I ate half their food when I got there. Now I have a spacesuit with my name on it in case I ever have to do it again.

I had to sue Mr. D to get him to stop telling people that he was "training" me. I have never met the man. We settled out of court.

I make money with endorsements and in movies. I do "special effects" by levitating things and people. I make much handsomer and more muscular "superheroes" than me fly!

Generally, I'm having a pretty good time these days being remarkable.

This story happened because my brother Simon was doing illustrations for Rabbit's Foot, the story that opens this anthology, and sent me a letter during that period with a very rough sketch he identified as being for a "possible sequel." That's all it took to set me off. I won't print that sketch here because it's very rough and because it doesn't actually illustrate a scene in the story, but it just shows how little it takes sometimes to make an idea form in my mind.

Rabbit Punch: a Tall Tale of Tannu Tuva

So, you think what I do is funny? Go ahead, laugh. I've heard it all before. I know they don't award degrees in what I do, at least accredited institutions don't. Maybe that says more about those institutions than it does about my science. My name is Cyrus Buckle and I'm a cryptozoologist.

I know what you're thinking, "he's some redneck whose life doesn't amount to much so he fills his time with self aggrandizing fantasies". I have a bachelor's in biology and a master's in history of science, both from Briarton College in Briarton, Kentucky. It's a small college and I'm proud to say that I am the first to complete a Master's program there. I know you never heard of it, but it's fully accredited, look it up on the net if you want. It is also where I currently work as a teaching assistant in biology.

Anyway...just to get it out of the way...I'm *not* looking for Sasquatch. He might be out there, but he's not my particular focus, nor am I obsessed with the Loch Ness monster and, before you ask, I don't even *believe* in Chupacabra.

I'll tell you what I did spend years looking for if you promise not to laugh. It's not that I'm unused to mockery, after all people who do what I do accept that enduring some derision is part of the game, but I take what I do seriously despite what some people might think. I made it my business to seek out the Easter Bunny. That's right, I said the Easter Bunny. If you have heard of me at all then you have probably heard of the *name* some people have taken to calling me. That's right, I'm *that* guy. Yeah, o.k. Get the hilarity out of your system. Are you done? Alright then, I'll tell you the *real* story. Just, please, don't call me that name, o.k?

Maybe you have heard of it. Lagotherium. *Lagotherium Steinhassi*, a monotreme that lived a lifestyle similar to that of a cottontail rabbit, had

been believed to be extinct. For those of you who are unfamiliar with monotremes, they are a group of mammals with only a few living representatives. One of those is the famous duck-billed platypus of Australia. These creatures are warm-blooded mammals and have hair, but lay eggs rather than bear their young alive. *Lagothorium* was built very much like a rabbit and could even be mistaken for one in bad light. Unlike a rabbit, it possessed a horny beak rather than a rabbit's cutting incisors. The eggs of *lagothorium* were reputedly pretty colorful. It is this upon which I and others have based the idea that this creature was the basis of the Easter Bunny legend.

The creature had been known from a number of fossils discovered in Spain in the 1920's. Later a naturally mummified example of unknown age had come to light that inspired a very interesting paper by scientific historian, Peter Reston. Reston had become convinced that *lagothorium* was responsible for stories about the Easter Bunny. He also purported to have had evidence that the creature had survived into the modern era. This evidence, so he has claimed, was in the form of an egg from the creature provided by a correspondent. The hatchling (more properly referred to as a *puggle*), he said, lived only a very few days without its mother's milk and no amount of human care was able to help it thrive. He further claims that his cat made off with the dead specimen with the result being he had nothing concrete to show of the creature.

Stories of this nature are well known in my field. It is as if these creatures pack up evidence of their presence and take it with them when they leave. Frustratingly, Reston had not so much as a hair or a scat belonging to the *puggle*.

Whatever. He observed something unique and I knew that I could follow up and bring a live example of this amazing creature into the awareness of modern humanity. If *lagothorium* is not extinct, I would find one alive and show it to the world.

Before I begin my tale, I need to digress. There is a high level of improbability in the events that I am going to relate. My story is marked by amazing amounts of luck, both good and bad. For at least two people, the luck was very bad indeed. I need the reader to understand that everyone at one time or another experiences a string of improbable events. We even say things like "things happen in threes" much more frequently than "lightning never strikes twice in the same place." In my case lightning struck quite a few times.

The egg was purportedly collected in the republic of Tuva. I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if you had never heard of the place. This country lies

at the geographic center of Asia and is the remotest place on Earth from any ocean. In area, it's a bit smaller than the island of Great Britain. It is currently part of the Russian Federation. Over the years it has been known variously as Tyva, The Tuvinian Soviet Socialist Republic or Tannu Tuva. The people that live there are Tuvans and Russians mostly. The Tuvans are a people closely related culturally and ethnically to the Mongols. You can't fly there directly from anywhere in the Western Hemisphere and even getting there from Russia or China is tricky and expensive at best.

The rest of the scientific community doesn't take people in my discipline very seriously and we certainly don't get research grants. We have to figure out other ways of getting things done. I went to the Mysterious World Network with a proposal for a show. You know them, they made *In Search of the Littlest Bigfoot*, *Flying Rods: Threat from Another Universe?* and *Time Machines of the Ancient Egyptians*. I had participated in a program they did about recent sightings of the thylacine, commonly called the Tasmanian wolf, an animal that reputedly went extinct in the twentieth century. The makers of the show were unable to definitively prove otherwise. The shows get good ratings and the network has money to throw around. I knew that they could outfit a full scale expedition to make *Discovering the Origin of the Easter Bunny*.

What I got was a single cameraman and a ticket on the Trans-Siberian Railway. This cameraman, was something else. I would be hard pressed to find a guy that seemed less likely to keep his eye on the ball. Tall, bespectacled, enthusiastic, his name was David Beranski, but it probably isn't any more. I'll get to *that* in good time. Not only was he shooting the show, he was also making a "making of" documentary about the show *and* shooting a self directed documentary about being a cameraman for MWN. He used hundreds of feet of tape shooting every minor incident of our trip. He had a lot of little button-sized cams that connected directly to his cell phone, his GPS and even a tiny display in his glasses frame. Wherever we went, he would put a few up to get angle shots. I'll grant he was creative, but somebody a little more focused would have been better. I was just praying that he would point the camera in the right direction when the time came. In spite of that, Dave was a pretty good traveling companion. He spoke fluent Russian and had been out this way before. While I was writing a script, he had been making friends with all sorts of characters, not all of them particularly reputable looking. Every night of the four-day journey from Moscow to Krasnoyarsk, he managed to come up with an unlabeled bottle of apparently home-made vodka. I tried some and while I can hold my own with the best so far as whiskey is concerned, I sensed that this stuff would

soon be the end of me if I wasn't careful. I left the lion's share to Dave who put it away by the glassful with no visible ill effect and little sign of drunkenness.

Dave spent his late evenings playing cards with these guys who had shaved heads and strange tattoos of things like barnyard animals in military uniforms and strings of big black Cyrillic letters. They looked like bad news to me, but I assumed at the time that I could just be having a moment of cultural prejudice. He told me they were "bratava" whatever that meant. I know that things got a little tense when he started taping them for his own documentary, but they convinced him to stop and everything was smoothed out with vodka all around. He entertained them with stories of his travels. I had asked him not to talk too much about our expedition, so he simply told them we were out to find something that would make us famous. They thought it might be some sort of treasure hunt and he saw no harm in letting them think so. Dave did all right at the card games, though, returning with fat wads of ruble notes in high denominations.

We reached Krasnoyarsk, a small nondescript city and took a "bus" south to Turan where we were to meet with Doctor Yelena Ya. Turetskeva, the woman who purportedly provided Reston with the *Lagotherium* egg.

Turetskeva would be the key to it all. I had in my possession a translation of the letter she had sent Reston in which she explained that she had read his paper and immediately recognized the creature as appearing in a local folk tale. Upon quizzing the locals she found quite a few of them who had claimed to have seen the creature alive and she was able to pay one to bring her a specimen, unfortunately dead, but that is where the egg came from and she didn't know that it was still viable when she sent it to Reston.

I had been lulled into a false sense of security by the fact that everything had gone smoothly up until now. I had been told many stories of the great inconveniences that awaited me traveling across Siberia, but it had been a mostly uneventful trip. The supposed "bus" that we had bought tickets on was actually a truck with bench seats along the walls of the container. The passengers sat on the benches and their baggage and some other cargo was piled in the center. There was a loud thump and the truck came to a sudden stop at a very "one-horse" looking town. We were informed that they would proceed no further that day due to a broken axle. Dave suggested that we get off and see if we could rent a car to get to Turan.

It was a small and mostly temporary looking town. What appeared to be the business center included four or five of what looked like Quonset huts, a single one-story brick and concrete structure with a satellite dish on top and several yurts. There was a guy actually skinning a goat outside of one of

these. We had been assured by the train conductor that we would be able to rent a vehicle here, but it didn't seem likely based on the general look of things. Dave inquired of a passer by in Russian and was directed to the single permanent looking building. I assumed that it was town hall. It turned out to be a tavern. The guy who ran the place was who we were looking for. His name was Dimitri Nikolayevich Borodin. In spite of the Russian name, he looked like he could have been Gengis Khan's fatter brother. Dave started to speak to him in Russian, but the man waived his hand and said in heavily accented English, "You speaking Russian like stinking American!"

I said, "We *are* American."

Borodin looked us over speculatively. "Is for real truth?"

"It is."

He smiled broadly revealing that he had several stainless steel teeth. "I *love* Americans! How may I help you gentlemen? Anything for your need or comfort, for that you may come to Dimitri Nikolayevich! Anything in this world. I can get for you!"

We explained that we needed the rental of a car to get to Turan, which was still some hundred and fifty kilometers to the southwest. "I can help!" Declared Borodin. "I have several premium automobiles!" He led us out to a temporary looking galvanized steel shed with cinder blocks around the base.

I was dubious. As he was opening the massive padlock on the door I said, "We will need something large enough for all of our camera equipment, enough gas to reach Turan and a good map."

"There is plenty petrol and you don't need map." Behind the door sat a large limousine. It was in good condition, but had obviously not been used in quite some time.

Dave walked over to it and ran his finger through the dust on the hood. I asked, "Why won't we need a map? We can't afford to get lost out here."

"Lost? Getting lost will never happen with Dimitri Nikolayevich at the wheel!"

"At the wheel? Just a minute...."

"I am so sorry, but I do not have such long acquaintance with you gentlemen. I could not allow my car to go with you to Turan, eh, unescorted. Surely you can understand my position. So I will take you there for very fair price of two hundred Euro!" That worked out to about two-hundred and seventy bucks. It seemed a little high.

Before I could even open my mouth, Dave spoke up. "We are so sorry to have wasted your time Gospodin Borodin. Our budget does not allow for such an extravagance. We reluctantly must seek more economical transport."

Borodin's face fell. For an instant he wore a mask of crafty speculation. "How much you pay then?"

"Fifteen hundred Rubles, not a kopek more." He was never going to go for that, it was less than sixty dollars. Sure enough...

"You want I should cut rate *and* you offer me stinking rubles? You may be *kissing my ass* for fifteen hundred rubles!"

I held up my hands. "Wait a minute! Wait a minute! I'm in charge of this expedition, not him." I shot Dave my best attempt at a 'shut the hell up' look. "Mister Borodin, may I offer you one hundred American dollars for your services as well as accommodations when we reach Turan? We shall also need transport back here when our business is concluded."

"Two hundred fifty dollar!"

"One hundred and fifty."

"Two hundred dollar."

"Alright. Two hundred."

"Petrol is not include."

"Fine, we'll pay for gas." I counted out two hundred in crisp new twenties plus thirty for gas and handed it to Borodin.

The barkeep smiled as he accepted the cash "I need to make small arrangement." He led us away from the garage and back to the bar where he yelled in, I suppose Tuvan, into a back room. A girl emerged. She looked about twelve, I later learned that she was in fact seventeen. She was short and skinny and wore a tight T-shirt that revealed her to be endowed with apparent mosquito bites for breasts, emblazoned with the Russian words "Я ненавижу вас." My Russian stinks, but I think the T-shirt translated as "I hate everything." Her hair was moussed into seemingly random spikes and she wore black lipstick. She smoked a cigarette and carried herself with an affected bored and bratty attitude. Borodin spoke to her again in Tuvan and she replied in same although I clearly heard a lot of Russian and the English word "assholes" thrown in there somewhere. He replied loudly while gesturing helplessness and pointing at Dave and I. She looked at us through tightly slotted eyes as if we were the cause of all the evil in the world, then turned and went into the back again.

"Tasha, my daughter." Explained Borodin. She returned seconds later wearing a pistol in a shoulder holster.

I was alarmed. "What the hell is the gun for?"

Borodin replied, "She needs to mind tavern. Patrons, they drink. Sometimes they get, er...ideas. Pistol discourage ideas."

"You mean someone might try to *molest* her?"

“*Molest?* No, but some valued customer will perhaps wish to be *fucking* on her, maybe someone who has no acquaintance with her, you understand. People who know my little Tasha have awareness she is most crazy teenager for many kilometers around and premium marksman who will kill them without remorse or shedding of even singular tear.”

“I guess that’s kind of what I meant by...oh, never mind.” Egad! I looked into the black slits of the girl’s eyes and found no evidence of a soul. I fully believed she would do exactly as he described. “Well...all right then. It looks like your business is in safe hands. Shall we go?”

The Tuvan countryside flashed by our windows. We had the road mostly to ourselves. Once we were passed by a battered pickup truck with a few goats in the back. A little later a guy came from the other direction on an ancient, but very loud, motorcycle with a laughing little girl in a sidecar. They waived and smiled as they roared past us. That was all the traffic we saw until we were just outside Turan. As he drove, Borodin sang in a local style that incorporated sounds like whistling and humming at the same time with a liberal helping of science-fiction sound effects thrown in for good measure. I endured it. Dave seemed to actually like it. I finally suggested that he turn on the radio. To my chagrin and Dave’s amusement, the exact same style of singing was on the first station he tuned in.

The car was a lumbering beast; a *Hongqi* manufactured in the People’s Republic of China in the early sixties. I bet even Jay Leno doesn’t have one. It certainly held us and all our gear with room to spare. Borodin told us he had gotten it in exchange for ten cases of vodka in 1978 and had spent three years trying to find parts to put it back into like-new condition. He had only driven it once or twice a year since then. According to Borodin, the vehicle he uses most is an old ZIL-130 truck of uncertain vintage. I saw it parked outside of the bar. A large section of one side was replaced with a sheet of plywood. Nonetheless, the big black limo was obviously his favorite. “Is premium vehicle,” he claimed, “runs like dream!” I think that half the reason that we were making the trip in the *Hongqi* was so he could show it off.

The sun was sinking lower in the sky and I hoped that we would reach Turan before it set. “I have nephew in Turan, perhaps I drop in on him. You come, we shall drink and tell stories!”

“That might be fun.” Said Dave.

“Except that we have work.” I reminded him. “I’m sorry, Mister Borodin, but we will have quite a bit of work to do when we arrive in Turan.”

“You think only of work? Do you never stop for smelling flowers? What is so very important for you to have come here from half of world away?”

This Mongol with the Boris Badinov accent was starting to wear on me. I sighed and hoped I wouldn't have to make too long of an explanation. "We are here hoping to film a very rare animal in the wild. It is an animal that most people think is extinct."

"Country of Tuva is not so big. There is no dinosaur here!"

"It's a *small* animal, similar to a hare, but not a hare."

"How is it hare and not hare?"

"For one thing, it lays eggs."

"Like a *chaskytulay*?"

"A what? What did you call it?"

"*Chaskytulay*. I don't know. Little...animal. Lives in fields in spring. Not many people see, quite elusive. Bite hard when caught. Beak like falcon."

My breath momentarily caught in my throat. I turned to look at Dave and saw he was already taping the conversation. I guess he *did* know when to point the camera. "Have you ever seen one?"

"No. Never. Not so many people do. They are few and sleep all winter, run from people in summer and spring. My father came from Moscow to take census for Khrushchev. He liked it here and wed Tuvan woman, my mother. She told him tales of the *chaskytulay* and he determined to catch one. If he were to have brought this creature to Moscow, he would surely have been decorated by Supreme Soviet. He found only misfortune. He could never shoot one or trap one. He found few eggs. Some of the people here, mostly older, use egg of *chaskytulay* for medicine. He sold eggs but never caught one either alive or dead."

My God. "When was this?"

"Allow me to think. Father die when I am nine years old and last egg I see was when I was six, maybe seven. I am fifty-five now so...perhaps nineteen-hundred and fifty-eight?"

This man had seen an egg in 1958. Reston claims to have had an egg in his possession in 1995 but that was over ten years ago and the animal is vanishingly rare. Could I have been too late?

Before we knew it we had arrived in the town of Turan. Turan boasts a small airport and a former Soviet era machine parts factory that now makes shoes. Near the factory are some apartment blocks that had been built to house the factory workers. One of them now functions as a hotel. We booked three very reasonably priced rooms. It was too late for me to contact Turetskeva at the secondary school where she worked and I didn't have a home phone or address for her. Borodin spent a good piece of time insuring the proper treatment of his car. The desk attendant remained unfailingly good humored when presented with his numerous demands, barely a single

one of which he was able to meet. Finally they were able to agree that the car could be garaged in a large shed owned by a local farm for a small fee. This fee, of course, *I* was obliged to pay.

Everyone on the hotel staff was very helpful and quite civilized. I know I shouldn't say that as if I'm surprised, but the backwater hamlet where we hired Borodin formed my first impression of the country. Those folk seemed to be the Central Asian equivalent of hillbillies. Turan was an actual town with schools, stores, industry and houses of worship for a number of religions including, but not limited to, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist.

We got a meal of some very nice steamed lamb dumplings. They came without sauces or condiments and didn't need them. They were delightful and filling. We were offered a drink called "araka" I tasted it and decided that it wasn't for me. To my palate, it came off like highly alcoholic toe-jam. Dave put down quite a bit of it, as did Borodin. I just had tea.

In my room was a small black and white television that got two channels. One channel was all news delivered by a perky young Russian woman speaking alternate lines in Russian and Tuvan. The other was showing an Indian film that looked like it might have been made in the sixties with subtitles in four languages, none of them English. I turned it off and made some script changes on my laptop until I needed to sleep.

In the morning, I met Dave for breakfast in the hotel's cramped little café where we had tea and toast spread with very rich fresh buttery cheese.

We obtained directions to the secondary school which turned out to be near enough to the center of town that we could walk there so when Borodin finally appeared we let him go off to find his nephew.

I had no preconceptions whatsoever concerning what Yelena Ya. Turetskeva might be like, and yet somehow she was still surprising. We were directed to her "office", which seemed to be much more like a crowded stock room than an office, to be greeted with great enthusiasm by a woman who was somewhat short of five feet tall and built approximately like a fireplug. She looked to be around fifty years old with a round ruddy face and a huge gap-toothed grin. "Greetings Doctor Buckle!" I don't know where she got 'doctor'; I don't have a Ph.D. "It is such a pleasure to be meeting you! You have come such a long way and I will not disappoint you!" Her English was excellent, but heavily accented and she spoke very fast, so understanding her would not always be easy. "I have right here! *Lagotherium*! I am certain of it!" She grabbed my wrist with a surprisingly strong hand and pulled me across the room and pointed at a shelf.

There it was indeed. I have seen more professional jobs of taxidermy in my time, but it was without a doubt *lagotherium*. It looked only slightly different

from the reconstructions. The fur was gray marked with tan and brown spots. Reston had shown me the mummy. The hair on the mummified specimen, what little remained, had changed color with age to an almost copper red. The beak was of an even ivory color in Turetskeva's mount. In the mummy it had been a dark mottled yellow. "So, this is the chaskytulay!"

"Da! Chaskytulay is what the Tuvans call it. She is very rare! This is the only specimen I can get in over twelve years. People here go their whole lives and never see one, but they all know about her. That name, that Tuvan name means 'hare in spring'. They find eggs in spring, but eggs that are found never hatch."

"The one you sent to Doctor Reston did. The puggle only lived a short time."

"Amazing! Even after going through the mail. I would never have expected."

Dave had been taping our whole exchange. With a proper edit, this would be great stuff. "We were really hoping to get some tape of a chaskytulay alive in the wild. Can you give us an idea where the best places to look might be?"

"I have never seen one alive! I have looked, but never found."

"Mister Borodin, our driver, tells us his father had collected some eggs, that they can be found. There must be adults nearby these places."

Turetskeva was brought up short. "Borodin? Where did you meet this Borodin?"

"He runs a tavern a ways up north. The train broke down and we hired him to take us here."

"Dimitri Borodin! He is most certainly overcharging you!"

"You *know* him?"

"It is a small country, Doctor Buckle. He hosts a festival every spring with wrestling and, games with horses, what is American word? Yes! Rodeo! Many people attend. He just had two weeks ago! He charges almost double for vodka and araka and *triple* for Budweiser beer!"

"You get Budweiser in Tuva?"

"You get Budweiser *everywhere*, man." Said Dave. "The first man on Mars will be able to get out of his space ship and go right out and buy a Bud. It's like Starbuck's or McDonald's."

"He is overcharging us, but he has also been very helpful."

"Who is running the pub?"

"The girl, I think her name is Tasha."

Her eyes grew wide. "Dimitri will not want to be away for too long. Tasha...she is highly strung."

“Yes. We met her.” I looked briefly at my watch. “Doctor Turetskeva, I was hoping that I might convince you to join us when we go to seek out lagotherium in the wild. You are the closest thing to an expert we know.”

“People have looked for the chaskytulay many times and only find her once in a lifetime. Why do you think you’re different?”

“We have special cameras that will see heat from the body. Even if a small creature doesn’t come into the open, we can still find it. Then we can look with a hidden remote camera. Will you come and help?”

“Of course. It should be a simple matter for me to become excused from my obligations here for a short time in order to guide my honored guests.”

“Will tomorrow be all right?”

“Da. Fine. We will need a truck.”

Turetskeva showed me various things she had found in her research. She had some Xeroxes out of art books showing Scythian jewelry that supposedly depicted dragons and griffins, but were quite easy to interpret as stylized depictions of lagotherium. She showed me copies of medieval Mongol manuscripts that showed creatures that also could be lagotherium. Dave dutifully photographed all of these.

I spoke to Borodin that afternoon explaining that he would have the day off as I needed a truck and driver. He had spent several hours drinking with his nephew but was still mostly coherent. “You have hired *me* as driver! Now you want change? This will not do Gospodin Buckle!” He pronounced my name as if it were spelled *Bookool*.

“Be reasonable, Mister Borodin. That limousine can’t get through the countryside where we must go.”

“Hongqi will go *anywhere*! It is most premium vehicle! You shall see, if it shall fail you, I will return all of your money!” I didn’t believe that last for a second, but he was making it difficult for me to refuse to let him at least try.

“Very well, but I will not pay for any damage that your car may suffer.”

“There shall be no damage, it is next thing to tank!”

I had called and arranged that Dr. Turetskeva would meet us where the car was garaged. This “garage” turned out to actually be a greenhouse in which the owner, a hefty Tuvan woman who spoke no Russian and certainly no English, was raising a variety of exotic tropical flowers. She had carefully moved some planting boxes aside to allow the huge car to park there and would not allow Borodin to start the engine inside the greenhouse lest the exhaust damage her orchids, so we had to first push it outside. It was while we were engaged in this activity that Turetskeva showed up.

She clasped hands with Borodin. “Ekii, Dimitri Nikolayevich!”

“Strastvuytye, Yelena Yakovna! Beautiful Lady!” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively. The two immediately launched into a conversation in Russian.

Dave nudged me and whispered, “I wonder if they’re screwing. Do you think they’re screwing?”

“None of my business if they are.”

“I mean ‘cause you don’t call a woman that looks like that ‘beautiful lady’ unless you’ve screwed her and for some insane reason want to do it again, is all I’m saying.”

“Will you shut up for God’s sake?”

“Yeah, they’re screwing all right.”

I sighed and said to Borodin, “We ought to get going. Doctor Turetskeva thinks that our best bet will be at the edge of the trees west of town.”

“Did I not tell you about stopping to smell flowers?”

“You can ‘stop to smell flowers’ on your own time. Right now you are working for me. Let’s go.” Borodin frowned, but he got in the car.

Amazingly, the huge limo managed to bounce its way through the countryside with only a minimum of difficulty. It was bumpy as all hell but the shiny black box-like machine continued forward.

People have lived in the land of Tuva for thousands of years. Not just Tuvans, but Scythians, Mongols, Uzbeks, Chinese, Turks, Tibetans and Russians. They were even invaded by the Japanese once. Every resident, visitor and invader had left his mark on the landscape. There were walls and old foundations everywhere that seemed to date from periods ranging from medieval times to the Soviet era. There were little Buddhist shrines all over the place, some of them seemed very old, but many had fresh flowers or fruit placed in front of them, so someone was making veneration at them still.

We were a quarter mile from the edge of the trees when Turetskeva called for us to stop. “We should walk the rest of the way. Automobile makes too much sound.”

We gathered up the camera gear and the blind and walked towards the tree line. Progress was slow so that Turetskeva could keep up. At six foot four, Dave’s stride was at least twice hers so he had to inch along or risk leaving her far behind. Borodin had a small caliber rifle that I had asked him to bring in case of any problems with wild animals. Once in a great while there had been tigers seen in these parts.

We set up the blind for the camera and Dave went to work calibrating the video with his laptop and selecting a lens. Everything was prepared and he turned on the camera. A view of the edge of the stand of trees came up on

his screen. "Be vewy quiet," He said, "I'm hunting wabbits!" He snickered at his own wit.

Borodin, ignorant of the cultural reference, was looking over his shoulder. "Is not rabbit. Is chaskytulay!"

"It's a lagotherium, if we are so lucky to find one" said Turetskeva. Dave sighed and, no doubt, wished he were playing to a hipper room.

I stepped out of the blind and scanned around with binoculars to see what I could spot and that is when a small miracle took place. I had seen nothing of great interest through the binoculars and stopped to rub my eyes and opened them again while looking down at the longish grass. It looked like it might have been a large exotic flavored jellybean marked in uneven patches of green, gray and brown. It was an egg and definitely not a bird egg. Do snake eggs come in those kinds of colors? I wasn't sure. It wasn't in a nest, it was just out here by itself. Weird. I didn't touch it I just signaled for Dave to come over. I pointed at it and he turned the hand held on it. After he had gotten a few feet of tape I called to Turetskeva and Borodin. I asked them both, "Is this it?"

In perfect chorus they responded. "Da."

"Why is it here? All alone, I mean."

Borodin said. "This is how father said he would find. Alone, no mother, no nest."

"It cannot possibly survive laying eggs in this way! Why not in a nest, or even better a burrow?" Wondered Turetskeva.

Seemingly from nowhere, a fox emerged from the tangle of grass at our feet. Oblivious to our presence, it seized the egg in its mouth and ran off. Borodin raised the rifle, but I put my hand on the barrel and pushed it down. I shook my head. "Leave it be. I just had a very strange thought." I said. "I bet if we take our time, we will find another egg."

"Another one!" cried Yelena Turetskeva, "Are you mad? I know of no one before us who ever found chaskytulay egg simply by looking for it and you expect to find a second one?"

"And perhaps a third. I'm thinking that not all of the chaskytulay's eggs are for reproduction."

We cast about through the long grass and before another half hour had passed, Doctor Turetskeva had come upon an egg. "Grab it before another fox comes along!" I called.

She was reluctant at first when I requested that she dissect the egg, but she eventually did and to her surprise found no embryo. "The egg is not fertilized!" She said.

To me it was no surprise at all but pointed toward confirmation of my hypothesis. “No, of course not. They wouldn’t lay fertile eggs in the open, only in their burrows or warrens or wherever they nest. I suspect that as soon as a female has mated she seeks shelter and doesn’t come out until her eggs have hatched. One who hasn’t mated still produces eggs, but isn’t programmed to hide out.”

Turetskeva was skeptical. “It takes energy to produce an egg. Why should she lay useless eggs?”

“Because the foxes like them. The wolves like them. The badgers like them. And they all know that they come from the chaskytulay! It is a survival strategy. They can take the lagotherium or they can take the egg. The egg doesn’t run away and the lagotherium makes more of them! It’s probably not the animal’s only defense, but it’s an important one.”

Turetskeva knitted her brow. “The egg I sent to Doctor Reston came out of the specimen that is mounted in my office. It was not found in a field. That must be why it was fertile.”

“Pretty cool.” Said Dave. “But, like you said it can’t be its only defense.”

“I noticed a few things in the mounted specimen that weren’t obvious in the mummy. The musculature of the jaw tells me that it can probably deliver a pretty vicious bite with that beak and the hind leg shows a few things in common with its cousin, the platypus probably more evident in the male if we can find one.”

In my periphery I caught a hint of motion in the grass. “I think our friend, the fox might be back.” I said.

“I think not.” Said Borodin and he pointed toward the rustling. “Look closely. Is not red.” Indeed, it was not, nor did it move like a fox. There was a hopping motion and the fur was gray with brown spots. “Is chaskytulay!” He whispered.

Dave was taping as the creature as it moved through the grass. It became aware that it had been seen and dashed away. Amazing.

The sun was going down and I thought we should call it a day. We had enough to say mission accomplished. We had an egg that would yield DNA and better footage of the creature than anyone has ever gotten of Bigfoot. Armed with this, I could go back to the States and hold my head high, but I wanted more. “I wonder if we could trap one.”

In a moment of irrational optimism, I had brought a no-kill trap on the expedition but had left it in my hotel room. We returned with it early the next morning and baited it with berries, some sliced carrot and a tomato. Dave put up a camera with a motion sensor near the place we had seen the

chaskytulay the previous day then we went over into the treed area to see if we might find the den.

We were looking around the bases of trees when Dave's GPS beeped. He had it linked to the remote camera. "There's activity at the trap!" He said. We came out of the woods and looked across the grass. There was a man standing near the trap. "Aw...what the hell is this?" He moaned and started running toward the trap. Strangely, he suddenly started slowing down and then he stopped and stood there for a couple of seconds. He turned around and started running back toward us with an expression of mortal terror on his face. As suddenly as before he stopped again, staring in fear at something just behind us. I turned to see that a second man was emerging from the woods. I ran up to Dave to find out what was up.

"Dave, who are these guys?"

He looked like he was near tears. Terrified. His voice quavered as he answered. "Oh...just a couple of my friends from the train." Just as he said that the man from the woods passed Turetskeva and Borodin and headed up to join us. Dave said, "Uh...Hi, Grigoriy, what brings you here?"

The man replied in excellent English. "David, My old friend. We Have come to offer gratitude to you for teaching us the wonderful Texas Hold-Up game."

"It's *Hold-em*, actually."

"Hold-Up, Hold-Em, whatever it may be named, it is a game at which you *cheat* with such wonderful proficiency. My admiration is boundless."

Dave was sweating. "Ch-cheat...no...I didn't..."

"Please, David, it would make me quite unhappy if you were to make our reunion unpleasant with the telling of lies. Surely you do not wish me to be unhappy. You went to the toilet and left your glasses. I tried them on. Imagine my surprise when I saw my own back! I discovered your little camera you used to view my cards."

Dave attempted to laugh jovially. It was a sickly sound and conveyed no good humor, only fear. "Come on, Grigoriy! It was just a little joke!"

The man raised an eyebrow. "A joke, you are saying? I am not so sure, David. Swindling me for a ruble might perhaps be amusing under certain circumstances, swindling me for fifty-thousand rubles...Perhaps my sense of humor has a deficiency, but I do not get it."

"That's only about *two* grand American." Whined Dave.

"I agree that it is not so great a sum, but it is still very disrespectful and must be addressed."

The other man who had been standing by the trap started to walk toward us.

“Seriously, Dave, who *are* these guys?”

Borodin tugged on my sleeve and spoke softly in my ear. “They are *bratva*. Not such good guys. Very bad to get on wrong side of.”

“They’re the *mob*, man!” Said Dave in a panicked whisper. Shit! What had this guy gotten us into?

The man spoke directly to Borodin. “There is no need to whisper, my friend. I am in no way ashamed of what I do and besides, I am the victim here!”

Borodin pronounced a nasty sounding throaty syllable that I think was a Tuvan curse word.

The man called Grigoriy lost his amiable demeanor for a moment. “I do not know what you said, my friend and I do not wish to know, but you must understand that I take being disrespected very seriously.”

At that moment we were joined by the other man who had been by the trap. Grigoriy asked him, “*Chto sverkh tom, Sasha?*”

“Bonny rebbit.” He replied with a grin.

“*Krolik?*” Grigoriy sounded puzzled and slightly annoyed.

My heart leapt! Did we get it? “Did he say what I *think* he said?” I didn’t wait for an answer, I simply sprinted toward the trap.

I heard Grigory call from behind. “Please, wait a moment!”

It took me only ten seconds to get there and I’m not in very good shape. Pure adrenalin did the job. There it was and it didn’t look happy. The rest of the group was right behind me with the *Bratva* guys right behind them. Grigoriy had produced a pistol and was no longer looking affable. “Dave! Get over her right now!” I demanded. Dave walked over and obediently pointed his camera at the trap while watched closely by Grigoriy.

“Ladies and gentlemen, meet *Lagotherrum Steinhassi!*” At the approach of the group, the creature backed into a corner of the trap and hissed loudly while fluffing up its fur. The standing fur on its face looked like “mutton chop” whiskers.

Yelena Turetskeva said, “Wonderful! It is different from my specimen. I believe that it is male!”

Grigoriy came up and whacked me in the head with the barrel of the gun. “Do not run away again! It is most disrespectful!”

I gripped my forehead in pain. It felt wet. “Ah! I’m sorry! It’s just that this is what we came here for!”

“Please do not be fucking with me! You did not come around the world for a bunny rabbit!”

The one called Sasha opened the trap and reached in to grab the chaskytulay by the scruff of the neck and held it up. “*Ey, Grigoriy!*

Vozmozžno mi boodyem imyet tushyonoye myaso krolika!” He held it close to get a good look while comically licking his lips. With the speed of a striking cobra, the lagotherium sunk his beak into the mobster’s lower lip taking out a small chunk of flesh. He cried out in pain and blood dribbled down his chin.

“Oooh, you wascal wabbit!” Said Dave giddily. I think that Dave might have been losing it a bit.

Sasha held onto the chaskytulay firmly but now at arms length as he reached into his belt for a gun intending to put a bullet through it point blank, but he didn’t get that far. The creature struck out at his forearm with its hind leg and he released his grip. The lagotherium bounded away at lightning speed leaving a wake through the tall grass.

“Rabbit punch!” said Dave and Grigoriy smacked him in the head with the revolver.

This was unbelievable! I shouted at Sasha, “You let it get away, you *jerk!*”

Sasha was on his knees, his bloodstained features pale. He gripped his forearm, which seemed to be covered in one big bruise. “*Ohn zakolol myenya!*” He started sobbing and moaning, but quickly grew strangely calm. “*Ya Sonn...*” he mumbled and fell over into the grass.

Yelena put her hand on his neck to feel his pulse. “I believe he has passed away!”

Grigoriy was stunned. “What happened? He was only kicked by a rabbit?”

I no longer cared what this stupid thug could do to me. I turned on him in rage. “You dumb-ass bastard! It’s not a fucking rabbit! It was the zoological discovery of the century and your asshole buddy let it go. I’m glad the stupid fuck is dead!”

“Oh dude!” Exclaimed Dave.

Borodin looked as if he was attempting to be as small as possible.

Grigoriy looked at me steadily, coldly. “Sasha was my cousin. For you to insult him while he lies there dead...I cannot allow that to stand.” He pointed his gun directly between my eyes. I met his gaze knowing it was the last thing I would see. There was a loud “**SMACK!**” sound and blood was suddenly fountaining from his temple. Grigoriy crumpled to the ground in an untidy heap.

“What the....” Coming through the grass from the direction of the parked Hongqi was Tasha holding a still smoking pistol.

The girl called out in perfect unaccented American English, “Are you O.K., Dad?”

“She can speak English?” Dave wondered aloud.

“Apparently.” I breathed. The girl started to run toward us. When she got to us, she surveyed the scene.

“What happened to the other one?” She asked.

“He made a mistake.” I said. “He had a run-in with a male chaskytulay.”

“I thought that was only a myth!” She turned to Borodin. “Are you o.k.?”

“I am okey dokey.” He indicated the dead men. “Bratva. It was close call. I am happy to see my little Tasha!”

I said to Tasha, “I had no idea you spoke English so well when we first met!” She just looked at me through slotted enigmatic eyes, but said nothing to me.

Borodin said. “She is constantly watching satellite TeeVee! She learned Hindi and Chinese very well also. It is most helpful with guests.”

She kicked at Grigoriy’s body. “This asshole came into the bar last night asking all sorts of questions about these two Americans. Which one of you is David Beranski?”

Dave said. “That would be me.”

She looked him up and down. “You should be very glad that this one is dead. I should be your *God* for putting a bullet in him! He was bragging to me how he was going to slit your throat while he sodomized you!”

Dave looked like he was going to be sick, then he *was* sick. Everyone took a step back from him.

Tasha returned her attention to Borodin. “Anyway, that fuckwad held a gun to my head and made me give him the keys to the truck. The minute he did that, the piece of shit was already dead; he just didn’t know it yet. As they pulled out, I jumped on the back and hung on until we reached Turan. It was bumpy and dirty, but I have done worse things. Then I followed them until they led me to you.”

This teenager had more than a little bit of James Bond in her!

Turetskeva asked. “So why is that one dead?” She pointed at Sacha.

I explained, “Like its relative, the platypus, the males have a poison spur on its hind leg, but the venom is apparently much more powerful than that of the duckbill. In Sacha’s case, it killed in seconds. Platypus venom causes pain, but rarely kills. That does not appear to be the case with lagotherium. They are ill tempered and give a nasty bite as well. You *do not* want to piss one of these little guys off!”

As I was speaking, Dave was gathering up his camera equipment and walking back toward the car. “Hey! Where are you going?”

“Oh, come on, man! We’re done here, right? Two dead mobsters, do you think they don’t have friends? We need to be gone, man!”

He was right. We had some footage, an egg...it would have to do. It took us a short time to drag the bodies into the woods, and then we headed back to the hotel. I happily booked a room for Tasha. After all, she saved my life.

The next morning I knocked on Dave's door when he didn't show up for breakfast. The door was ajar and all of his stuff was gone including all the tape!

I tried to get information on him but nothing turned up. Borodin was insistent that we get out of town. I had nothing else I could do. I thanked Turetskeva and bid her farewell. Tasha Drove the truck back home while Borodin took me to Ulaan Battar in the Hongqi for three-hundred dollars. From there I was able to get a flight to Tokyo and then to LA.

Somehow, on the last flight, all of my luggage with the exception of the live trap got lost. All my notes, the egg, everything...gone.

The executive that I had contracted with at MWN was livid over the loss of the tape and demanded to know where Dave Beranski was. He all but accused me of murdering him. Needless to say, I got nothing. Back home, I found a postcard waiting for me. It was from Dave. It had no return address, but the postmark showed that it had been mailed from Buenos Aires. He said he was sorry, but he had to get away and that I shouldn't try to find him. He was changing his name and going underground. The bastard, he could have at least sent the tapes!

Two days later I finally got around to putting away the trap and decided to clean it. I opened it up and saw a couple of pellets in the bottom. *Lagotherium* scats! Evidence! They would have DNA. If I could only get the right people to look at them...it was such a classic situation. I had to convince the world that I had found the Easter Bunny on the strength of a couple of turds! For proof of the discovery, I *literally* had squat! I didn't know if I should laugh or cry. I *was* going to be famous; I only hoped it would be the right *kind* of famous.

I got an agent who booked me on the radio and TV talk shows. I even got to be on Regis and Kelly in New York City! I was telling Regis my story about tracking down the creature that spawned the story of the Easter bunny and showed the scats in a small clear plastic box. He leaned over and looked at them and laughed. "Wow! Will ya' look at that! You're Professor Bunny Poop!"

I remember chuckling and saying, "I certainly hope *that* nickname doesn't stick!"

Yeah, well, it did.

That's All Folks!



The Author